The Tower

2006

University of Montevallo

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Cover Art by Kim Deale
"Conflict in Harpersville"

Editor's Note

I feel incredibly privileged to have worked with a group of friends so loyal that they stuck by me during the madness and magic that is editing The Tower. Our staff was the largest, most cohesive group to ever produce The Tower, and I believe this year of rebirth has generated the finest art and literary work from our campus. This magazine is completely student produced—from the first interest meeting to the call for submissions, from the grueling fundraising project all the way to the glorious finish. And this is a glorious finish. I am proud to know I was part of something amazing. I love you all, and you'll never know how much I appreciate your support. Thank you for giving me this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

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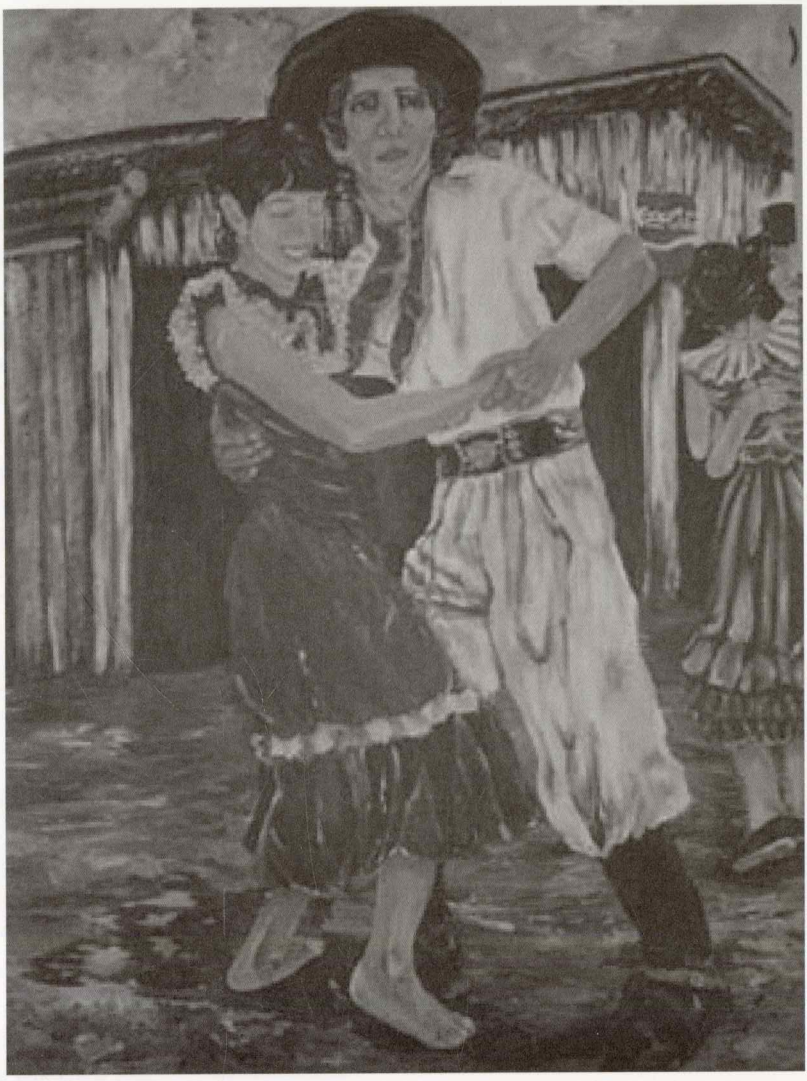
Aimee Brown Mather
1977-2005

Aimee transferred in 1998 from the University of Alabama to UM, where she immediately felt at home. Her sharp intellect and infectious smile soon endeared her to students and teachers alike. An English major and Harbert Writing Center tutor, Aimee was an avid reader and a gifted writer. Visual art, however, was her passion. Aimee's commitment to artistic expression was surpassed only by her devotion to her family, friends, and pets. Working with various media, Aimee produced a wealth of work that speaks to her talent, her unique perspective, and her interpretation of the world around her. Several of Aimee's paintings, along with her poetry, were published in The Tower before her graduation in 2000. Her many contributions to the University of Montevallo and the Montevallo community will not be forgotten. Aimee's humor, graciousness, insight, and compassion will be missed by all who knew her.



"For peaceful thoughts in a billowed quiet..."
--from "For Peaceful Thoughts" by Aimee Brown Mather

poetry

--EDITOR'S CHOICE--

Tricking

There's a man I've been sleeping with
these past couple of weeks.
Black headed
Burly.
Fucking
not in the mind,
onlyin the bed.

but last Sunday
after I passed out
From the pot,
The exertion
I can't remember which.
Among the ripples
of satin sheets
he dropped

twenty

forty

sixty dollars

I eyed it as I fixed myself in the bathroom
to go push sweaters at GAP.
and damn,
I wanted to take it.
to tuck it into my tight underwear,

but the trick was,
couldn't.

Ashley Boles McGuire

--EDITOR'S CHOICE--

--EDITOR'S CHOICE--

Idolatry

I covet your whole-milk skin.
Like porcelain—creamy porcelain.
But I swing open your door
and see your china wrists
cracked open.

Lively blood crawls
out of the bright,
jagged edges.
Open-fisted, it grasps for fresh air,
marvels at your still-demure,
perfectly painted face.

Jennifer Hughes

--EDITOR'S CHOICE--

swearing never stayed the moon

I remember the scuffling of summer toes -
toes that were ambered peach butterfly shells on top
but weathered barnacles on bottom,

toes touching in the offhand way
of sandpipers crossed in the gandy dance
of tacking wavelets to the shore,

I know I swore, but.....

when your voice swirled round me
in foam fantasies that breathed their own
with every rasping breath,

I know I said, but.....

flesh recedes in drying folds
sweat-salted for eternity
your laughter slipped away from me
on a stronger tide -

I never lied.

P.T.Paul

The Black Balloon Blues

I'm standing in the shadow of a black balloon,
got my Mad Hatter's hat on, got a name to lose;
I feel that all evil in the world is contained in one little white lie;
I see the milkman and a housewife leading a normal life,
I see a fisherman sitting by the bayou eating with a bowie knife,
but I'm standing in the shadows, breathing a lonesome sigh.

In the event that I don't make it to see your parade,
dream of me in a wedding cake, painting the inside opaque;
I want everyone to see my sugar-coated frown;
I see Cinderella in a pin-striped suit clutching a medallion,
I see Monet sitting outside in a pile of leaves studying Italian,
but I'm sorry if I don't make it to your parade, I hate to you let you down.

Dust settles down like old virgins in the springtime when widows cry,
outside my tent with high-heeled boots on, I'm letting my noose dry;
I'm sitting and thinking about what it means to be a man;
I see the undertaker leading wisemen by the throat,
I see William Blake smoking a cigarette by the fenceposts,
but I'm watching the dust settle, hoping that you'll too soon understand.

Babe, if no one ever loves you like I do,
sit with a good book and don't recognize that it's me who's talking to you,
gang up with a legion of undead spirits and fight;
I see a doctor with a blue bag giving out prescriptions to those who are sad,
I see a B-movie actor with false tan lines who says he's my comarade,
but if no one ever loves you like I do, babe, I'll stand here all night.

Robert Frederick

Baptism

The age-speckled man lowers himself gently
into his vanilla sudsed pool
while I watch, arms outstretched,
in case.
He cups his hands
under the frothy tumble and, smiling, waits
for his knees to disappear.

He places the dry, yellow washrag
on the bubbled surface,
watches it capsize,
slowly sink.
He waits for it to disappear.

I perch on the counter watching
my grandfather melt and disperse with his suds
and wait for him to disappear.

Jennifer Hughes

Tender Communion

In the yard
New, not nearly ours,
As the garden of someone else—
        A tenant previous—
Bounded and rebounded,
You ambled forward then withdrew,
A Gerber daisy—
        Red like sunset—
In your hands.

Fingers small
As young dandelion stalks,
Protruding like petals
From a sturdy palm,
Caressed the leaves
Of the daisy.
"We'll plant this here,"
        you announced,
Words whistling through teeth
Gone, lost to passing youth.

Kneeling, knees resting in wet grass,
You dug the hole,
A tomb for life—
        To inspire it—
Put our Gerber daisy there,
Then worked ancient magic
With baby-fat fingers;
Said a prayer or a blessing—
        Your own incantation—
And inspired something
knowable yet unteachable.

You communed;
I watched,
Glad to be a part of you,
The Tender to the garden,
But wanting very much
To join the communion
I felt destined to observe:

The garden pouring forth,
Responsive to your touch
And care,
To your desire
For something better,
Something profound.

And in the dawning summer,
Cool, low-tone spring just a memory
In the shade of the vibrant summer sun,
The garden delivered her offspring
Into your dainty hands.
The daisy, already in its second season,
Rebounded to your prayers
As you reaped colorful rewards.

Treasure Ingles-Thompson

Imagism

We face each other in opposing
mirrors of thought,
seeing our own reflections
of what the other believes.

We speak, we know,
because the mirror says so -
we hear because we see
that we have ears.

One hand moves
and is recorded in the glass.
A look is passed.

If we could see what we are saying
we would trust the words
for their solidity.

As it is, it's just you and me
pantomiming our lives -
and the mirror makes three.

P.T. Paul

Texas 1993

The headlights on the interstate zoomed by
like our own horizontal meteor shower.
We were young, beautiful, and doomed;
we were the reason poetry was created.

We laid naked and vulnerable in each others arms,
knowing one wrong move would be a death sentence.
But our bodies, bathed in the sweaty moonlight,
serenaded by the hum of rubber, were poetry.

The trees that hovered over us like feathered curtains
were the only witnesses to the secrets of that night.
Their canopy still holds the heat of your crooked smile
and whispers our poetry to the blushing wind.

Melissa Armstrong

For Heloise

Begging, pleading,
That strong woman there in black
Remembers the cool pinks of first love
And the red-hot passion of his theology.

Sermonizing, demoralizing
He stands tall, erect, and postures himself
To deliver a sermon to purify her heart and mind,
Forgetting his contributions to her education.

Seduction is part of his past, he postulates
Yet she seems unaware of his technique.

Could it be that this sweet young thing
Had wanted it too? Never ached for losing
Her greatest commodity? Even as he built
The economy of soul on it?

She watches memories of him,
Lying In bed. Lying in his heart.
Capitulating and erradicating sins on the outskirts of town,
His hands sliding into skirts of her gown.

Temptation in her touch, her breath,
In strands that fell in ebony from her natural crown,
And he—fully aware of each Eve-like trait—
Pushed himself into the spectacle,
Imagining himself the snake
As he glorified his pregnant thoughts
With issue that would be subdued.

Caught in the moment, they murmured
Milk-and-honey words that promised
Retreat and the sublime.

She ached and shivered from head to toe,

Reveling in covert completion
And aching with the vows she had made
In her mind and with her body.

He ached only in the moment,
arching his back in ecstasy
As he progressed and retreated
In his metronomic grind.

Treasure Ingles-Thompson

Still Life

He leaned around the canvas
explored the model in front of him
still as granite
but with pulsing heart
and rising chest
He raised his brush to stroke her likeness
fetal in its newness
color blending
and edges forming
He gasped at the beauty
as he created it
something better
than that before him
He knew little about life
but mimicked
what he saw
and created for himself

Treasure Ingles-Thompson

Storm

my father and I on the front porch
and the wind swings us back and forth
but we are not in motion, my father and I

while ants roam, a syncopated rhythm
their made mounds- spit and dust-
like a magnet beckons.

crickets leap, courting the threshold
because as he says it is a sin
to kill a cricket inside.

tiny hoppers in the grass thumb
green strings, an alarming melody--
orchestration of omens.

I watch us, my father and I
I watch me watching him watching
puzzling explosions in the air

fading puffs of cat's cradle
a mystery to me, something I
do not know, something

I will come to know
a silence forever
inside my father and me
outside in the rain.

Ashley Boles McGuire

Determined

His sleepy eyes gaze at the VCR clock—
it flashes eights.
It's a good thing,
he doesn't want to know how long it's been
since the slammed door sent that ugly china plate
jumping
to the floor where it shattered
into thirty-seven hateful shards.
Her third dramatic exit this year failed
to grab his attention.

His laughing eyes glance at the door—
it swings open to her return.
She resets the VCR clock—
He needs to know how long this will take.
She slams the bathroom door,
turns on the water:
soothing—comfortable—warm.
Her fourth dramatic exit
will not fail.

Jennifer Hughes

I'll always find you Alice

When I made that pretty knife.
The shining steel stopped them from laughing.
A little surprising the way their blood fell in the shape of your face my dear.
And I with my fingers thought it only right to fix your hair in the oozing red.
Madness they call it...most amusing.
As if I were some crazed, ragged prophet yelling in the street.
As if I talked with the dead like some false gypsy fortuneteller.
I only talk with the residents in my head because they speak sense.
This room is too boring, all padded and white and clean.
I liked the cold bars and wet bricks of the gray cell more.
At least that place had felt real.
But they were mad about the bodies so I had to move to this.
At least there's no one here to laugh.
They never laugh in my head, only whisper.
Always whispering, like wind blowing at tree limbs.
Always there, as sure as grim death.
But I can hear if I listen.
I'm supposed to find a way out they say, to come see you Alice.
To kill you and make you mine forever.
Yes, you can't run away from me again when you're dead.
And no more tears either, not when I have your pretty sapphire eyes in my pocket.
They say all I have to do is strangle the man who comes with the questions.
I've worked this horribly tight jacket loose now. I can move my arms again.
I can choke him with the too long sleeves and spit on his stupid inkblots.
Yes, then I'll come find you again Alice.
No matter where you go,
I'll always find you Alice.

Eric Cottingham

Scatological Rant

I say, "Scat!"
and the cat scurries off
in a flash of orange
tabbied to a meow
of "Now Hear This!"
to the fish in the bowl
who floatingly stroll
through pastel plaster castles
on loping orange fins
while pretending
to be amazed at the cat
who strikes back
with a paw against curved glass
drawing only flippant looks
from lip smacking prey
who slowly circle away
only to circle back
for the next attack,
like the zeros
in my checkbook
or the pheromones
in my co-workers cocoa
that tweaks
my twitching nose
in that rose-garden
of work
whose thorns chide
my wandering mind
in this bowl where I circle
in slippers and sweats
while the game
grates my nerves
like my boses' cigarette
till my voice splashes out
like warm aquarium bile
and I say, "Scat!"
and the cat scurries off.

P.T. Paul

Her Mother's Desk

This room, it seems,
Has been designed
To reflect the pallor
Of the one who lives here.
Glass shines wet like tears
That flow down grey cheeks
And rest on silent, palest lips.
A tongue, surprising in red,
Experiments with the salty ocean there,
Grimaces at the images evoked, past:
Blue skies above the crashing coast,
A sun-baked childhood, heat energy, a tan.
Now, sun seeps through paths
Technically altered, averted
By blinds adjusted just so—
Not playing, not streaming,
  Neither heating, nor illuminating,
Only being—as if being were
Ever only anything.
Swatches scattered across the great mahogany plank,
The desk where she read her books,
 made her studies,
 planned her life from clippings:
 YM, then Cosmo, finally Modern Bride.
Swatches promising to patch
Holes in the unraveling fabric of being.
Just swatches—incomplete in 2 X 2 squares.
Wiping tears from cheeks threatening to burn.
She pauses at each.
Not ecru—hinting at stains to the lily.
Not white—the lily has bloomed, then folded.
Grey—like air in skies long ago marred by spires to industry.
In her mind, the piecemeal gown robes the princess,
A crown of thorns replaces the veil only for the spectators.
And the plank is disassembled, reworked and then gilded.
Where once, she planned, she now is placed.
The box is closed and she sleeps.

Treasure Ingels-Thompson

On you, my love

What use is poetry? To describe with skill
The essence of leaves or a fly's angst
Or faith as a seed laid on the grist mill –
It's no real use in the car, or at the bank.

The questions I so carefully lay out
By planting dots and dashes here and there
Lead only my mind round about.
Ode to my shoelaces – who else should care?

How many feet are in this line? Should I
Count at all? Tell me, most beloved pen,
Do the O.E.D. and scansion quantify
A lack in meeting men?

Buzzing against blank paper, lost poets
Have forgotten the window so near the lamp.
The scent of beloved's pubic hair, in a moment,
Becomes blushing rose petals' delicate dance.

Yet I still try. Create drawing sublime
Through breath, lead, and cliché, all my peers!
Memories recalled, day dreams by design
Will be an ever-present pest, and held dear.

Kelly Lambert

Desperate Heart

while your hands are balled into fists
mine have been torn clean off my wrists
i should be crying now
but all i can do is wonder how...
how will i wipe my tears away without fingers
they will just wind up
rolling down my cheeks onto my shirt
which will leave me cold and shivering
i imagine the cloth will get too heavy and full
it will leak onto the floor
and steadily rise
then what will i do?
i have no grip, nor the means to hold a paddle
i will drown.

Amy Hicks

Clashes

When I was seven, I vomited on the carpet directly
in front of our couch which has daisies dancing across it
and mother stretching upon it; instead of removing the stain,
father cleverly positioned the sofa to both cover the vomit
and jut rudely into the walking space between living room
and kitchen.

Mother blames her hardly-ever-cooking on the couch
blocking her path; father scoffs: one must roll one's stale
body off of the couch for it to be in one's way.

The only daisies that aren't faded beyond recognition
are in the shape of mother and her long limbs — they mock
me in their technicolor glory, and I notice that the hateful
blossoms never matched anything in our living room.

Jennifer Hughes

Parting

Sitting on the sun-heated back of a rusted green dinosaur, I watch the field's grasses dance, mocking me. He watches me watch, then leans in and braces, "We've got time," he whispers. Now its 4:30, and soon he'll leave again. "I'll call ou...later. Don't try mine". The wind suddenly blows cold right through my thin green dress. "We've got time, nothing else," he repeats adding a smile and deftly he captures that loose strand of hair and fits it back to my ear. I lose the battle, and looking into his face, I know he sees that one tear defiantly creeping down my face. He sighs, "I won't be reached through that same practiced gesture," so I crawl inward. As the sun marches resolutely home, I turn my back and feel its warmth slide down my back, legs, neck. I turn again into the sun and look into his eyes, now obscured by shadow and cloud.

Tammy Mitchell

Wanting

Stop it already,
With those blue eyes.
Mesmerizingly beautiful,
Too far out of my reach.
For me...
never tangible.

Randi Tubbs

Summertime

Nina sang
to the man who sold vino tinto. Jarabacoa left me
empty. Too much openness, too much difference.
Full of wine, up the hill, into dark. Raspy
Dominican rain began to beat and blow, bringing
small gifts--liquid love. Inside the cruel wood of
the common room, drunk from the foreign air
Nina sang
beside a chair she used to drum out the rain and
in the rhythm, she tipped it over and over and
over again. Its rough awkward legs crashed.
Cymbals on bunkhouse floor, keeping time with
her tap tapping brown foot
Nina sang
with a voice oozing crushed velvet over her
stick-out-pink tongue. Sorrows of the Southland.
Hers and mine both different. Mine and hers still
the same. The wine escaped but still I felt full
for a lifetime
Nina sang
and cried. Her voice mourned along, shaking me
out of my Caribbean sleep. The rain tried to hold
her, angry on the green tin roof. But she sailed
us away, in full speed, rocking me back.

Ashley Boles McGuire

Blueprints

Create your own worlds,
built as fine as toothpick architecture,
Each arch and beam balanced neatly
on words
or phrase,
twisted soundly,
riveted and riveting language.

Quit disassembling worlds
already constructed in star-studded blueprints,
hanging in far-off skies, mapped and signified
in beams that take eons to travel
to your sight anyway.

Sweep the dust from your imagination
and start anew.
Work in sand, mud, clay
like ancient hands
that created without guidance—
without rules—
organic reality
becoming principles,
then laws.

Treasure Ingles-Thompson

Hearts Desire

He did not want me.
He wanted my mother.
And then, only the mounds
and hollows of her --
the darkness inside her --
her in the dark.

Did he resent me
from the quickening?
Her sickening of me,
her hardening of heart,
her swelling of belly?

Did he lie beside me,
trying to find
the lover he had lost?
Tracing her flesh
with his unwanted hands?

Did he stand in the kitchen
watching her knead
the biscuit dough, wondering
where lovers go
when their hearts leave the room?

Her womb was just as fickle to me,
the three of us
now jockeying to have
our needs met --
me, as the least strong,
getting
all that I could swallow.

As the hollows under her eyes filled,
her part fulfilled,
she left me to the loneliness
of my personhood
and I stood
outside their bedroom door
like a traitor.

P.T.Paul

The Safe

I never go anywhere--
Not without my silver bangles and chain
DAHHHHHLING
They fit so smart on my wrists, like they can see.
Oh, did you notice my jacket?
Yes, it's new of course; it was made just for me.
They bring me My meals to My private room.
I never lift a finger and I never leave.
Why should I?
I've passed my due even though its already been paid.
They just didn't know I'm way past my stay.

The bars close shut. The safe's not sprung.
I'm a precious jewel she says over and over.
Only precious things are kept
Under deadbolt, lock, and key.

Tammy Mitchell

1/2 a gram

I stand here with vapid display of teeth
bloodied on the half warmed wit
spewed before my eyes.
Eyes that gleam like cracked glass
when needles feel like love.
I know my lips are searing
and that my words do yurn.
But who needs all this poetry
when I've got half a gram to burn.

Z Harrell

Roach Real Estate

This old house that I love
breeds cockroaches.
It pops them out
of every crook and misplaced hole
it can find.

In a few weeks
I'll lose this home and
the roaches will grow rampant
and feed on the scraps
I left behind.

Today an infant roach,
crawling and milling around on my tooth brush
spotting for a fresh nest
moved me to jealousy as it scurried onto the green-glass shelf.
I forced it down deep into the glass with my finger,
its chitin oozing out,
underneath my thin nail.
An emptiness filled me as I watched its shell
swirl with the water down
the clean, crisp commode.

One day I'll return to this drafty lair
And meddle with the other souls
that reside inside
I'll explain to the roach, over bourbon
why it was
nothing personal, man.

Ashley Boles McGuire

Untitled

I watched you as you slept last night.
watched your beautiful
face
watched those incredible blue-green
eyes
flitting, darting behind closed lids
watched your chest --
scarred
from years of abuse
and pain --
rise and fall rhythmically
I watched as you rested
in perfect bliss
I watched you, so peaceful
and I wished
that I could
join
you in that perfection.

Susie Saska

Saturdays on 78

He remains in his creaky lawn chair one weekend
after another, in that crook
on the dusty highway; the tattered man
is a shepherd
to the shiny tomatoes –
his shiny, parched tomatoes.
The off-white jeep with one black door is oblivious
as it flies around the curve,
spraying dust over the invisible man
who sleepwalks to the blushing globes and sweeps
a daisy-dotted rag over them.
The smiling blossoms match his blue Dickies with the
permanent, ironed-in creases;
his Naugahyde skin dark against his beard –
speckled with gray hairs and dirt.
He glances up to see the jeep
shuttle past again,
watches his hand-painted sign
collapse in the red dust
with a sigh.

Jennifer Hughes

Pomegranate

Plump
and full of little seeds in a woven web.
I rip you apart to feel your juices rub against my tongue
and fall between my legs.
I pick you up then crush the kernels between my jaws.
My teeth crashing against one another
to form a sweet taste
that has stained my fingers red, purple, then brown.
It was cruel
to pick you from the batch.
The fattest fruit,
and the guilty prick into your weakness
that allowed entrance for my thumb.
It was rape.
Forcing you to spread,
exposing your cubicle of blood, seeds, and fatty flesh.
The bliss that filled my mouth with the overflowing sap
of your kisses, imploring to be within
my consumer appetite that is stuffed with the fruits of other
girls.

Jeanna Wiindsor

If baths were creatures sensate

we would build them
bowls of finest crystal
shot through
with caves of fire,

then,
lured into this vanity,
we would bewitch them
with candles of sandalwood,

beguile them
with camellia blossoms
offered petal by petal until,
thus distracted,

they would allow us
to mount them,
would mold their sinew
to our flesh,
second-guessing our intentions
with their tongues.

If baths were creatures
sensate
we would never
turn them out.

P.T. Paul

Pride Goeth Before

Sun-starved leaves flit and flutter
their way to the gutter
like anorexic teenagers sporting
the eye-splitting aura of addiction.

On corners, they gather to smoke their last,
gasping to ashes,
riding the updraft of their egos
to oblivion.

On the drains, they reign as royalty
among the dun-colored grass clippings,
scarlet letters to eternity
boasting the power and the glory of chlorophyll.

Swirling through the sewer,
pocked by caterpillar kisses and scalded by blight,
they protest to the darkness,
their stems waving emphatically,
that they could still return to the tree -
if only they wanted to.

P.T. Paul

repeat

my body against your body
so quite an old thing
the change from green to red
to white, as trees I've climbed
with lips to throat, collarbone
which when I touch, your eyes
shut. so quite an old thing –
the lulling mother, sleep
in firemen pyjamas, sleep
in shorts, my legs sealing
your knees, some kiss on a closed eye
some goodnight moon.
my body against your body,
nothing new.

Quinn White

Fading Reds

I fell in love
with his red hair first,
Auburn really.
Imagined running
My fingers through it,
Having it fall
Across my bare shoulders
Blanketting me
In the cool
Of the morning
When we were only awake
Enough to hear the birds.
It fell in curls,
Longer than mine and better kept.
It fell and repeated itself,
A crowning glory or achievement,
I never knew which
But wrote songs about it, poetry
Calling him Samson in his finest hour.
Then Absalom when I felt
Myself smothered by his vanity.
I imagined weaving it,
Turning it into fetished art
Like the Victorians had
Or those girls following
A troubled, lying messiah,
But had little use or need for fetishes
As long as his curls
Curtained and buffered me
Against the changing days.
Then spring turned to winter--
Or so I thought--
As the burning hues of spring,
Then summer, subsided
And I found myself surrounded
By the odd silver tones of winter,
Cooler but still comforting.

I hibernated there,
Knowing that it would one day release me,
Revealling warmth
That burned in auburn hues
Of warmer months
Like Daedulus's fiery wings.
The winter stayed, and I found comfort there
But no Daedulus.
He was only myth, and this one--
This heart beating like mine,
the drums of myth
Sounding in real time--
Is reality.
No Daedulus but Jack Frost
Nipping at his strands, hanging
Now in waves of once red tinsel
Accented today in silver like winter,
Like Christmas.

Treasure Ingels-Thompson

disdain not your sanguine tears

disdain not your sanguine tears
to know your loves
to know your fears
and martyrs method can you see
lost in blinding metocacy
satin dresses, onyx ,pearl
nothing? nothing for this world
dress you up like glitter moon
happiness promised so very soon
so walk like an angel
with tear drops so fragile
they so soon turn to sand
so in dresses do we dwell
like ravaged statues that never fell
but now tears are blood stone
and you cry so pure
what can you love
if you never knew what love is for

Z Harrell

On the Long Departing

In the curve of a day, the Sweetgum dips his fingers,
swirling silicone tresses absentmindedly.

Concerned with the coming moon,
the stream draws languidly through leaf and bark;
a nightingale's song of attention -
here and gone, alike.

Branch to branch, they join the trunks of elemental matter,
a nattering of currency exchanged:
a rattling of slender timbers temporarily entwined
splattering the tide.

Murmurs have it that they share a common ancestry -
roots and springs incestuously divined
so long ago
that no one knows which seed from which they sprang
and no one cares,

for they are on the long departing, as are we -
the branch from the tree, the stream to the sea, you from me.

In the curve of a day I squeeze herbal oils into my palm,
close my eyes against the water's fall,
and crawl my fingers through my hair.

P.T.Paul

Waffle House Ruins

Sugar circled the saucer
of your lipped cup.
I took it a grain at a time,
your ten cent waffle fortunes.
Free advice warrants no complaint.

We came here, you and I,
in the middle of the night.
Your cigarette smoke surrendered
to the faint cobwebs, lurking in the corners.
My grumbles crawled away
to lie next to Elvis, inside the jukebox.

Our memories filtered to the outside,
through porous bricks,
into the over-teased hair of our waitress.
What was her name?
Suzy? Suzanne? With the reclining husband.
We're vacant, our plank-hard booth naked
without us. Words
still matted to the rug, forever unswept.

I hope for some ocean to carry it away.
But even then some hunter of treasures
would dive down to the ruins.
The slick 45s.
Suzanne's voice, scattered, smothered.
Rusty spatulas and decaying batter.
Underneath the bar he would find
Your lipped stained cup.

Something beautiful was here.

Ashley Boles McGuire

Saying Goodbye to a Reflection

No worries here, I tell myself,
But eyes squint for a narrower
--Not closer—look,
Attempt to magnify
Grief hidden in crannied lines,
Pinched at the wide-released
Corner of my smile.
In the mirror
--every morning, evening, moments
Snatched away by ticking time—
Her face smiles back at me.
Mine is lost in receding color,
An ebb and flow of being,
Mottled memories no longer clear to me.
Dark eyebrows arch in question, or amusement,
And she purses berry-ed lips at me,
Mimics the pout I make,
Have made since
I first learned to turn the day around
On the dime of my expression.
Her forehead furrows and chin dimples,
And I pursue it,
Glad to see the spark in hazel eyes—
Red, green embers in a light pool of brown,
The vein of silver that spread to snow across her raven head,
The straight proud nose and sun-rich skin that proclaimed her lineage.
I would do anything to see that face again—
That smile or, even, an angry frown.
She moves her lips, whispers, "I love you. Don't cry."
I am five years old again,
Miss Tina reaching to me as Mommy kneels beside me,
Whispers in my ear, "You'll only have to think of me. I am right here."
Points to her heart and mine.
The tears that squirmed down chubby baby cheeks then
Burn me now. Rivers of sadness
Mar the image I pray to recollect.

Treasure Ingles-Thompson

Tryst

Suffocating rain, whose tongue
slides again and again
along the surface of my skin
and yet again lingers
on every matted hair
that would escape its snare
but that it is also there
as it is leaving.

Do not stop to catch your breath,
you storm,
or pull your lips away
but stay and let me drink
your liquidity.

You take my dust,
then, thinking better,
give it back to me.

P.T. Paul

Double Entendre

The delightful French gave me this--Double entendre,
But first, my mother
Out of love and desperation created--
A two-toned creature
Both sluggish and frantic,
Desperate and wise.

Mom craved blackberries--
Now just the sight of them
Makes her sick,
Doublesick she says
With a smile.

But I wasn't alone, never
Even when I ranted, screamed,
Stretched, and pushed as she did--
I couldn't make her go away.

I look in the mirror and see her... me?
Is that how I look--sound--feel?
I'll never know my Gemini friend.
I'll try to be me
But if I can't,
I could give "being you" a try.

Tammy Mitchell

Private Demons

Shadows wafted and swirled, moving where there was no movement, forming shapes they could not logically reflect. He cowered, whimpered, begged, pleaded--pulled his covers to his chin, but couldn't bring himself to block his sight. It had gone on so many nights before, but tonight it was different. Tonight they pulled away from the walls, slithered through the air, twirled and twisted until they were sliding along his bed, up his covers, across his fingers--they were cold to the touch. He screamed and tried to cover his face, but it was too late. They slid up his nose, into his mouth, wound through his hair, devoured him, until their blackness filled his very eyes.

Rachel Beverly

The Back Says 1931

Anonymous scowls line up---two black and white rows---
plain neat suits on a splintered bench,
simple faded dresses stand behind:
stoic---silent---hands on hips.
Two toddlers, unwilling to frown,
have plopped onto the grass at daddys' feet.
They eye each other cautiously---
cousins who will never share this grass again.
Charlie, on the left, slips out of the kitchen,
drowns in the trough beside the barn
the day after the first family photograph.

Jennifer Hughes

Formal
For Gertrude Stein

wrapped in silk
ladies wrapped in silk
little ladies wrapped
little lovely ladies
lovely little lovely ladies wrap
themselves in silk

picture pictures
picture galore
click clack of a button
clickity clackity
one-two-three

silent silence
booming blinding light
trapped in a forever frame
in a frame for ever

half past seven, seven thirty
lights dim forward then backward
blink on blink off

searching for a name
looking for a card
searching for a name
on a pretty little card

dinner is swell

metronome of idle chit-chat
chitty chatty chatty cathy
would you rather
gouge an eye or lose an arm

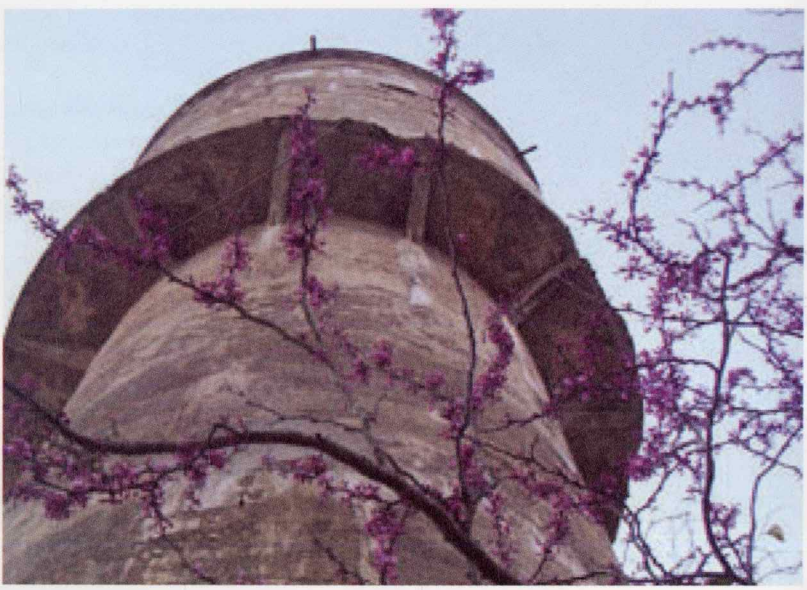
little ladies
wrapped in silk.

Ashley Boles McGuire

art

--EDITOR'S CHOICE--

Sloss Furnace
Ashley Abrams



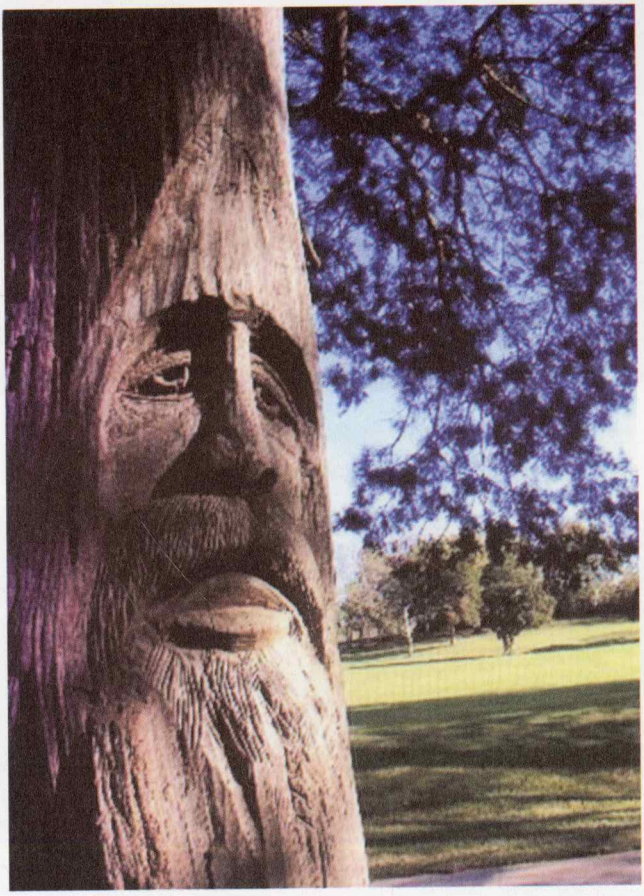
Untitled
Amy Hicks

Untitled
Amy Hicks

Perseverance
Ashley Abrams

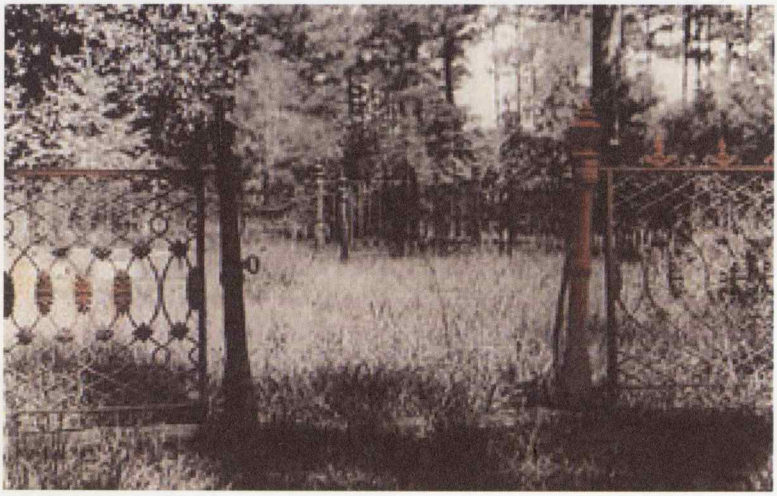
--EDITOR'S CHOICE--

A Lifeform's Creation
Michael Willett



Orr Park
Ashley Abrams

Poppy
Ashley Abrams



Fence at Old Cahawba
Kim Deale

Beheld
Natalie Alvarez

Untitled
Kenneth Waggoner

Tranquil Reflection
Ashley Abrams

Tomorrow
Jonathan Stutler

prose

Prose

--EDITOR'S CHOICE--

Elixir

Treasure Ingels-Thompson

On the front porch of the tall, weathered Victorian house on Nabors Street, a large calico cat slumbered atop a pile of old blankets, mail cascaded out of a once quaint now ramshackled mailbox, and a face peered out of a sidelight window. The face, veiled in a layer of grime that adhered to glass rather than flesh, peeked out fearfully into a world alien and foreboding.

To an outsider just entering this scene, the face and its environs may have been frightening themselves, characteristics of the illness that permeated the place. But to those familiar with the situation, the face was only a piece of a greater puzzle: the curious, enigmatic damsel known in these parts as Elly McBride.

The face, dear reader, begs greater description as it is at once representative of human masses and singularly unique. Attached to a slender neck which feeds like a river into two delicate tributary arms and a long, lithe torso, this face has been celebrated since its earliest days. But—despite celebration—it has the distinctive markings of a mad person, a loon, a nut. Some who see it would claim, "What big, lovely, brown eyes you have!" Others would proclaim, "You are certainly a wide-eyed beauty!" But others—sheepish and a little frightened by Elly's apparent Gloria Swanson impersonation—would simply avert their own eyes from her bulging, surreal stare. And as fixed and strange as Elly's gaze might seem, the strangest thing of all was what Elly saw in these people, or past them really, for—if truth be known—she was staring right through them.

Elly's distance must not be mistaken, though, for oblivion. Oblivious, she was not. Not easily engaged in conversation by those she knew best, each of whom seemed equally new and alien to her each and every time that she met them, Elly might aggressively pursue strangers for lengthy, dynamic conversations—making all the proper reactions to each statement, rolling her eyes for effect, releasing an infectious, tinkling giggle. Charming each stranger like a fairy princess.

Elly—wide-eyed and bushy-tailed, as she had once been described by some long-dead aunt—stared through the window today, watching the dozing cat and the infrequently passing cars as if each were an inhabitant of an elaborate fishbowl. Her interest in these fishes was superficial at best. The real goal

of her observation was the postman, whom she expected every day at 2:00 p.m. Today, he would be delivering a large box addressed solely to Elly McBride—paid for and ordered by none other than EB herself.

In the parlor room, Elly's mother Sheba tapped her cane in rhythm to "Blue Velvet," embellishing its intoxicating melodies to near polka-osity. Elly's right eye ticked to the incessant tapping even as she kept the left eye large as a silver dollar.

* * *

Pulling up to the curb, Percy Beaupre_ leaned forward, squinting against the sun as he peered at the McBride house at 222 Nabors Street. In the three years since Percy had been delivering mail in this area, he had never noticed a single personal card or letter addressed to Elly McBride. He had seen who he supposed was Elly peeping from behind the pink curtains of a first floor window or through a sidelight window as he had dropped the mail into the creaking, dusty box. Percy knew she must feel invisible. Her eyes were always fearful, round as saucers, too, but she never blinked nor looked away. Just kept staring at him like he was a magician about to complete some wondrous spell.

Percy had liked the look in her eyes—the childlike amazement and the stupefied expression that played at her wordless lips. Turning in his seat, he lifted a brown cardboard box from the space behind him. He bounced it up a little, then let it fall, trying to measure the weight of it. *Light as a feather*, he thought as he imagined what mystery lay within.

The return address glistened in gold leaf, a fancy adornment for brown corrugate that would end up piled next to Tuesday's garbage—full of old Coke cans, grass clippings, and palmetto bugs. ***Transformations***, it read simply, without so much as a logo to give its purpose away. Percy chuckled to himself, "Well, Sweet Elly. Usually my brown wrapper customers are bald on top, hairy on back, sleeveless and boxer-shorted, and pushing 300 on the bathroom scale. What's your dirty little secret, I wonder." Letting his eyes travel the slightest bit, Percy noticed more typeset in a smaller font. ***Foundations for a Better Life***. Intriguing. Simple. Elegant. Percy let his mind wander to previously conceived images of Elly in something delicate and black, begging for what they both knew she needed.

* * *

Transformations, Incorporated—nestled amid the foothills of Appalachia—was more than a promising new company. It was a company that made big promises to souls lost, suffering, or otherwise engaged. Surrounded by towering tulip poplars, the 1970s standard rusticity of the A-frame main building and the purposefully never-tended outer buildings evoked a calming, hence spiritu-

al, effect. Step Jenkins had, of course, planned it this way.

Step's desk, apparently manufactured from ruff-hewn mahogany extracted from forests an ocean away, was the focal point of the room. From the vaulted ceiling, a fixture dangled and cast an amber glow upon that desk, the man who sat there, and for a five foot radius. All exceeding areas, those just past the edges of and feet of the desk, were obscured by shadows that allowed only the faintest glimpses of objects in the room—bookshelves, a fireplace, and a large moose head above it were hinted at in pale outlines and spectral silhouettes. The marble eyes of the moose glowed a bloody red.

Step checked his books as he relaxed to the mellow tones of *Harmonious Twilight*, a strange conglomeration of flute, lyre, and what seemed to be whale song. It had been a good year so far. Up to May, at least, but June was slower. "Doin' as well as can be expected," Step declared.

His blue Bic tapped intermittently on the first letter of the only name of his weekly log. No computers for Transformations, Inc. Not for weekly logs, anyway. Step reasoned that the sheer act of each person's writing each day generated enough energy to keep the planet spinning. *Celestial hiccups may well be the result of a cyber-savvy, tactilely challenged society*, he had mused. The letter he tapped in heartbeat rhythm was E and introduced Elly McBride to the thoughts occupying Step's balding but active head. One account in all of a week, noteworthy if only for that. But this one, this woman, was a curiosity to Step.

Elly McBride had called early on a Sunday morning, equipped with twenty or more unevenly yoked questions for the distributors, manufacturers, or any other parties concerned with Transformations' *Promised Purpose Collection*. Step, awakened by the ringing of his 1-800 line, was in no mood for such a string of investigative needlings. But as dawn poured in through the unshuttered window at the far end of the room, he found himself waking and warming to the questions that poured forth in tinkling, childish succession. "Are there any physiological effects, sir? Will I grow larger or smaller, suffer side effects, have loss of appetite or memory?" The young woman at the other end of the phone asked humorlessly.

Step had coughed back a giggle, managing to answer with an air of seriousness, "No Wonderland here, I'm afraid. *Promised Purposes* does what it promises and that's about all. No more. No less. No surprises." Then, to engage the customer, he quipped, "If not taken properly, side effects may include death." He laughed in support of his charming repartee' but his humor fell on deaf ears.

"Death, sir, is not a side effect. It is the final effect. The Grand

Finale," Elly McBride stated sternly but flatly, adding inwardly, *'All she wrote,' quoth Mama.*

* * *

The catalogue on the coffee table was dog-eared and tattooed in blues and blacks where Miriam Foster McBride had marked possible Christmas and personal wish list items. Blair pants in a half dozen colors, only $9.95 each pair when ordering 6 or more, for her and other useful items for Elly: a ceramic beagle puppy that concealed a dish sponge in its backend (this one reminded Miriam of a living puppy that Elly had once cried her eyes out over at the Gulf Seas Mall, begging to take it home), a simple black digital watch that would beep at predetermined times to help Elly stay on task, and a handy gripping utensil that would keep her from having to bend over so much when she gathered pine cones on the back acre.

Miriam thought she was about done with her Christmas shopping—right on schedule, too. Tomorrow marked the half way point for the year; prices would rise everywhere and there would be less time to ship things back-and-forth for the right size and perfect color. In the growing heat of this June day—a fan blowing against her slippered feet—Miriam hummed the holiday tune "White Christmas" jubilantly, glad to be the sort of woman, and mother, who thought and planned ahead. Of course, Elly would not appreciate the hard work that went into mothering her (she'd always been lukewarm when it came to thank yous), but that would not matter. Miriam would continue to do her darnedest to bring that girl up, protect her, and make the best of the life God had saddled her with.

A mystery—a promise, too—lay within the catalogue that Miriam considered now. Hidden on a page riddled with tiny, colorless ads that promised increased stamina, longer-lasting pleasure, and more fulfilling sexual interaction, this mystery could only be discovered by someone willing to read between the lines. Miriam certainly would not find it; she kept the last five or six pages of any such catalogue locked tight with a silver and ribbed gem clip. *Nothing but SMUT on these pages*, she'd say. Then, peering at Elly over her glasses, she'd add, *Smut, I said, Sex Means Ugly Things*. Elly had often marveled at her mother and herself—two women who knew so little about the world but so many moralistic acronyms.

Ads on these pages might as well be full frontal sexual assaults as Miriam avoided them like the plague (they offered such threat to her mortal soul) and Elly sneaked peeks at them like a teenager slipping into a quarter movie, blushing at her subsequent and frequent titillation. This is what best explains Elly's sole discovery of the mystery here: her persistent and discerning

perusal of each of these ads, as boldly de-emphasized in black and white as brown paper wrapped magazines were, the visibly subtle mysteries more suggestive than secretive.

The effect of the ad, for Elly, was astounding. Carefully placed on the lower left side of a right facing page, this ad beckoned the same level of attention that Johnny had screamed for in *The Shining*, his face bobbing from lower-left to full center. Elly was unaware of this media trick, knew little of movies and such that were like open windows to a dangerous world. She could not laugh much, speak well, or question authority, but she could read, and the great mystery of this ad lay in the way in which its powerful message (Elly felt sure it was indeed a powerful one) was verbally, eloquently delivered:

"I'm a Nobody.
Are you a Nobody, too?
Don't Say a Word
They'd banish us, you know..."
We are butterflies, you and I,
Waiting for Transformation,
on the cusp of greatness.
Be a part of something great: You.
Call now for the Elixir of Being.

Elixir. Elixir. Elly had said the word softly, rolled its liquid curves over and under her tongue, savored the tasty sacrament. And somewhere deep inside, an epiphany bubbled as Elly recognized herself at the root of the word.

At the very bottom of the 2" X 2" ad, Elly found the contact name, telephone number, and location of the company. Step Jenkins. 205-XXX-XXXX. 247 Sanctum Road, Oneonta, Alabama. The interesting name and the locality of the business captured Elly's attention.

Later that evening, as the gold tones of day had faded into the dark humid night, Elly found herself pondering the Elixir of Being. The very nature of the word Being elicited strange response from Elly, partly because she could not imagine ever really being anything at all and partly because she would be willing to try a dozen outlandish possibilities to avoid being what she felt predestined to be: a lonely spinster with nothing to occupy her time but the endless clearing of pine cones from Mama's back acre. The term Elixir immediately caused her to imagine magic potions created to captivate lovers, powerful spells of protection, and remedies for otherwise incurable ailments. Elly had read many fairytales that described such practical uses for elixirs. Any such application would prove itself necessary to Elly.

* * *

million thoughts whirled through his mind now, and he felt his heart beating, his pulse racing with the possibility contained in the moment—endless possibility rendering the capsular moment futile. For all his desire, his heated response to Elly's physical closeness, Percy could not move. He wondered if he were paralyzed and by what. Perhaps the contents of this box were toxic. Anthrax. Or some other postal danger.

Sweat dripped from his upper lip now, beaded at his brow, too. His palms were clammy, and he felt as if he might swoon or hyperventilate. Never had he felt this way before. His heart ached—pain coming in stabs and jabs—as he watched the shy blankness on Elly's face turn to something akin to fear or revulsion. She could not think of him that way, could not look at him that way.

Percy stepped forward. Elly stepped back. Each of them aware of a strange tapping in the background. *Mama's cane*, Elly thought, suddenly embarrassed by her overreaction to the simplest act of greeting the postman. The tapping caused her right eye to tick again, and she turned her head back to the door slightly to conceal the stupid, involuntary rhythm of it. "I better go," she said in her tiniest no-one-can-hear-me-anyway voice, reaching for the doorknob. "Thanks for bringing this to me." She felt dumb saying it, knowing it was just his job but feeling as if it were a specifically friendly act.

Percy Beaupre' walked down the front porch stairs, lamenting his failure to speak up, to invite himself into Elly McBride's life. Getting into his truck, he tried to summon the courage to go back and start again. He could inquire about the contents of the box. He almost stepped out of the truck, too, but suddenly thought better of it. In reality, Elly was a certain sort of girl, a nobody really. In his dreams, she could be anybody.

From the side window, Elly watched the postman leave. *2:15*, she muttered to herself. *He must have been right on time. Or a day late. Or a day early.* She really did not know. She felt exhausted and disappointed. The most profound interaction of her life, over in minutes with nothing to show for it. Elly looked at the box in her arms. Thought about sending it back without ever having opened it. *Am I ready for this?*, she thought, expecting more than was rational or than she was entitled to...second guessing herself even in this, reader, for that was her nature. Turning from the side light—her window to the world—Elly headed into the room with pink curtains, directly across from the one filled now with the convulsive and woodpeckerish tapping of Mama's cane. Elly took her seat by the window and flipped through a catalogue, afraid to open the box.

--EDITOR'S CHOICE--

--EDITOR'S CHOICE--

Fragile

Douglas Hall

I can only tell my stories in the dark—during new moons or cloudy skies, but never during thunderstorms. Images of brutal thoughts and tortured souls haunt me in my dreams—like a song bird shot through the throat with a pellet gun and then caged to harness the power of hope. I wouldn't wish this on anyone. I can still feel the despair, like the throatless song bird choking to sing, still hoping that her mate will love her anyway.

When I was five years old, a girl my age lived behind my family's house and everyday we would swing together, ride our training-wheel bikes, and pretend we were husband and wife. We had our own house, too—a tree house between our backyards. Every day, we would sit in our tree house, have tea, and complain about our dog while we waited for our parents to call us home. And every evening was the same. Except one.

Our parents were sitting on the porch at her house, laughing. We knew it was time to for us to climb down, but I decided we should stay. I wanted to know how much longer we could have together.

Clouds were blocking the setting sun and the sky turned from dark blue to grey and black. She told me she was scared and that we should leave, but I argued with her and asked her for just a few more minutes. Rain started to beat on the boards above our heads and our parents started calling for us, telling us to hurry before it starts raining too hard. She couldn't see the ladder below us, so I told her that I would go first and then help her down. It's ok, I told her, and she believed me.

After I climbed down the five rungs of wood, I started to guide her, telling her how close her feet were to the first step. As she dangled her legs through the opening in the floor, just as she found the first step, lightning struck the tree sending her body through the floor, into a branch, and finally into the ground. I saw her body and a streak of light that trailed through the tree and I realized that I wasn't under the tree house anymore. I landed a few feet away with shattered wood burning beside me, but it was the souls of my shoes that I smelled, and it was her choking breath next to me that I heard.

That is my last memory of her. And that is how long we had together.

--EDITOR'S CHOICE--

The Rage Blackout

Jennifer Hughes

My therapist's frazzly, salt-and-pepper hair barely moved while she nervously twitched her face. She never could stand this stare-down, but I thrived on it. I initiated this slit-eyed contest at least once every session, just to see how long she would last. Never very long. Her face started bobbing after exactly 14 minutes, without fail. After her twitch kicked in, I knew it was only a matter of time – I was about to win.

We were nearing 21 minutes when Dr. Frank had a sneezing attack. I had to hand it to her; she tried not to break eye contact, but she had to stand up to get a tissue. The only therapist I've ever met to not keep the bright yellow box of Kleenex right next to my chair. After she'd resigned herself to losing my challenge, she figured she might as well speak too.

"So Julie, do you feel better now that you've exerted some of your power over me?" I wish my mother hadn't made me attend anger management classes, because I would have loved to smack the thick black glasses off of Dr. Frank's pointed, oily face – but *I am bigger than my rage*.

That mantra from class made me giggle out loud. *Shit, she's going to want to know why I laughed*. Surprisingly, Dr. Frank stilled her face but didn't ask what had made me laugh. She just patiently waited for an answer.

"The only way I'm going to feel better," I started sarcastically, "is if you back off a little. It's not my choice to be here." I slumped back into my seat, miffed that she had stolen my thunder.

"You've made it abundantly clear every week that you don't want to be here. Unfortunately, this is the kind of thing that happens when your mother finds you on the bathroom floor with bloody arms. Would you like to start there? With what happened that day?"

I thought I might as well humor her since I was required to stay an hour, and it had only been 23 minutes.

"Not particularly, but I guess I don't have a choice."

"You've always got a choice, Julie. A choice to let me help you or to suffer alone. I know you're carrying a burden – you can't hide that. Your family's concerned about you, and they've asked me to help. So allow me to do that. What happened that made you feel so hopeless as to take your own life?" Dr. Frank slowly leaned toward me, and for a second she reminded me of one of those celebrity interviewers, like she's actually interested in how much the engagement ring cost, or what kind of gourmet chow the dogs eat.

"I never said I felt hopeless," I begrudgingly offered.

"What did you feel?"

"I guess I felt angry. Angry and sad too. It gets old – feeling that way."

"Yes, I imagine that it does. Would you like to tell me what it was that made you so angry? Well, angry and sad?"

"I have anger problems; I get mad all the time."

"Julie, before you try to shut down the discussion, remember that I've read your file, and I've spoken with your mother. I know what's going on – do I need to remind you of it?"

Of course I just sat in my seat glaring at Dr. Frank.

"I know what happened last year."

***

I sat in the lobby of Dr. Frank's office complex the next week, trying to remember how our previous session had ended. I think I yelled about how my past was none of her business and that she could shove her psychoanalysis up her ass. Even while I was slamming my way out of her taupe-colored office, I knew that I would catch hell for ending the session early. That's why I was being forced to see Dr. Frank for two hours today, my mother's idea of a suitable punishment. I didn't know why Dr. Frank had to be punished too.

I glanced up when I saw her mostly gray hair and completely gray skin round the corner. She smiled and motioned for me to follow her into the office. I did, but I scuffed my feet all the way down the corridor.

"Have a seat, Julie. Did you have a nice week?" Dr. Frank settled herself into the blue and red armchair by the window. She had my chair positioned so that I was able to see the lake over her shoulder. I waited for her to stop arranging her skirt and tugging on her shirt. When she began twirling her wedding band on her finger, I finally spoke.

"It was pretty uneventful."

"Well, that can be good for relaxation. Let's pick up right where we left off last week, OK? I'd like to talk about last year –you were a sophomore then, right? A sophomore Chemistry major? That sounds incredibly stressful. What were your classes like?"

I shifted in my chair. Two hours – that's a long fucking time.

"They were hard, OK? I was busy, but I made A's and B's and stayed on schedule for graduation. All in all, it was a successful year."

"All right; that's a vague – but good – start. How about your boyfriend; you did have a boyfriend, didn't you?"

Here we go. "Yes. Chris."

"Tell me about Chris," she prompted. I knew that my short, cold answers were not going to keep her satisfied for long.

"Well, he was a senior. Pre-law. We dated for almost a year, but we broke up around Spring Break. I guess you want to know about that, huh? He was graduating a month after Spring Break, and I knew he wouldn't want to go to a big university and still be tied down. I figured it would be easier to break up before graduation. That way, he could meet plenty of new people in the fall, at law school."

She interrupted here. "It doesn't really sound like you had any feelings for him at all. Yet the two of you dated for almost a year? How were you able to stay so detached and cool?"

"I didn't want to make it into a dramatic scene. It's not like I wanted to ever marry him; it just wasn't a big deal."

She nodded her frizzy halo up and down slowly, absorbing what I was saying, and obviously not believing a word of it. I assume she saw right through my nonchalant attitude. She motioned for me to continue.

"Anyway, right before school got out, we were at this party at Adam's house. That's one of his friends. Chris has a lot of friends, and they throw a lot of parties. I decided to break up with him there – you know, so there wouldn't be a scene."

"And how did that work out?"

She seemed to smile at me. *Shit, did she just smirk at me? Is she actually grinning and laughing in my face?* I saw her shiny crows feet crinkle slowly, and I could hear a rumbling laugh from the pit of her stomach. *That little bitch is practically glowing.* I wanted to grab her tangled hair and slam her greasy face onto the corner of her oak desk. Or maybe just send it crashing through the picture window.

"Apparently you already know how it went, don't you? Why don't you consult that little notebook you're always scribbling in and try to figure out for yourself how it went?" I couldn't make myself stop shrieking at this Medusa sitting in front of me. Before I knew it, I was out of my seat. I had toppled the fern in the corner, spraying soil onto the carpet. Then I kicked my chair onto its side and looked up at Dr. Frank. She was scrawling something into her notebook.

***

When I woke up, I was on the floor of Dr. Frank's office. She was on the telephone with her back to me. I thought about standing up and sneaking out to the lobby, out to the parking lot, out to the safety of my little red Honda. But I knew she'd hear me. Besides, there was a giant fern blocking

the doorway.

"Julie, you're awake. How're you feeling?" Dr. Frank sauntered over to me, grasped my wrist, and pulled me to my feet.

"I'm fine. What the hell happened?"

"It looks like someone suffers from rage blackouts," she calmly informed me. "But you're OK now; are you ready to get back to work?"

This lady is fucking crazy if she thinks I'm staying here any longer. I just passed out; why hadn't she called an ambulance, or at least my mother?

"I called your mother," she immediately answered, as if I had been talking out loud. *Was I talking out loud?*

"Is she coming to pick me up? Maybe I shouldn't be driving."

Dr. Frank chuckled. "No, she's not coming to get you. You're fine. And we both feel that it would be most beneficial if you stayed here and worked right on through this little episode. I told her what happened, and she said for you to stay put. As a matter of fact, while you were resting, I got your car keys out of your purse. It looks like we'll be getting the full two hours today. And I'm not counting your little nap, so we still have an hour and 47 minutes."

I tried to start staring her down, thinking maybe if I could just get her face to start twitching, she'd get frustrated and let me go home, but she refused to participate. Instead, she walked over to the door and righted the fern.

"I'll vacuum up that dirt later." Then she sat back down in her armchair and motioned for me to do the same. I plopped down with a sigh and resigned myself to the torture my mother had forced upon me.

"What happened when you broke up with Chris at the party?"

"Well, he didn't want to break up. He was a little less than thrilled."

"Your sarcasm isn't affecting me in the least. Just save yourself the effort and answer me honestly." I dug my fingernails into my palms to keep from scratching her eyes out.

"He got mad at me. Well, really mad. Furious, I guess. He started throwing pillows around the room."

"Pillows?"

"Well, we were in a bedroom. I wasn't going to dump him in the middle of all of his friends. So I asked if we could talk in Adam's room. Anyway, Chris hit me with one of the pillows. He apologized immediately, though," I clarified quickly.

"Was it a sincere apology?"

I paused. "I guess so. He was pretty mad, but he never hurt me before, so I think he must have felt guilty. Anyway, he told me he would for-

get about the whole thing. As in, the breakup hadn't happened. But I argued that it was what I wanted. So even though he had calmed down, he started getting really mad after that. He threw bigger and harder things than just pillows."

"Like a baseball trophy?" I guess she really had studied up on me.

"Yes," I whispered. I silently remembered Chris jabbing my shoulder with that shiny, pointed trophy over and over until blood trickled through my sweater. I silently remembered him calling Adam into the room to laugh at my hiccuping sobs. I silently remembered him yelling at Adam to hold me down on the bed, to hold my legs, to hold my shoulders, to cover my mouth but not my eyes. I wasn't silent anymore as I remembered Chris calling several other people into the room to hear his announcement that the bitch had screwed him over, so she would get hers. I knew I wasn't silent anymore because I heard my own piercing scream echoing in my ears. It sounded like it came from some other office a mile away.

After a couple of moments, I seemed to resurface above the howling, to overcome the shrieking. I looked up to see Dr. Frank. She had put down her notebook, and she was holding her chin in her hand, just looking at me. Not saying a word. I stopped sobbing and just whimpered.

***

When I sat down at my next session with Dr. Frank, I noticed her smugness had disappeared. Perhaps she noticed that my sarcasm had vanished as well.

"Well, Julie, it would be trite for me to say that we got a lot accomplished last week. But I'm proud of you."

Yeah, that was trite, but I was proud of myself too.

"Thanks. I feel better now that I've spoken about it."

"Would you like to talk about what happened afterwards, in the bathroom at home?"

I shook my head no, even while I started in on the explanation. "Nobody believed me when I told what happened with Chris and Adam. My mom thought I was mad; she thought Chris had dumped me, and I was trying to retaliate. She just refused to believe me. And even though half the people at the party had watched it, none of them would come forward. They wouldn't back up my story; they wouldn't talk to me; they wouldn't call the police. After a few weeks of that, I just couldn't take it anymore. I hadn't done anything wrong, but it was like all of my friends were mad at me; like they blamed the whole thing on me. That's when I just decided I should kill myself. I didn't see any point in refraining."

Dr. Frank nodded her head. I guess she saw that I was finally opening up, and she wanted to encourage me but not interrupt me.

"So I tried it. I opened up my wrists one day after school. My mom wasn't supposed to be at home – she works downtown. But she was at home, and she heard me fall down. I pulled the hair dryer off of the counter when I fell, and she heard the noise. I hadn't locked the door because I thought I was alone, so she came right in and found me."

"And then what happened?"

"Well, then she dragged me from therapist to counselor to minister trying to fix me. She thought I had too much anger, and that I had made up the incident with Chris – so she thought I was seriously troubled."

"And what do you think?"

"I don't think that any of them helped me at all."

Micah Mobley
Rachel Hendrix

The Navigator

Adam Roberts

-Journal-

April 1, 2005: Could it be the thought of the future coming sympathy from loved ones that causes my obsession with suicide? What better person to feel sorry for than someone who was so god damn sad that they took their own life? But it wouldn't only be loved ones that mourned. Rumors of any death ignite sympathy in any average human. Though most of it is directed toward the family and friends—the ones with the loss. But suicide is the surefire way to gain the most sympathy for the actual dead.

Knowing the actual fame available by such an execution makes me giddy like a child. I sometimes fantasize about the horror that will ambush the ones who loved me. Their reaction to this unfamiliar dismay would demonstrate the love that wasn't always so obvious. But even in the ones whose love was clearly displayed, the reaction would be similar. I imagine my mother receiving the inevitable phone call and screaming hysterically as the reality slaps her in the face and she is held down by her fellow employees to prevent her from harming herself. Or perhaps my father returning home from work, exhausted and desiring an evening of slight inebriation and relaxation, only to be angered by a tarp lying in the middle of the living room floor. He would unfold the tarp to discover that its purpose had been the last sarcastic gesture of his son to protect his beautiful carpet. The sight of chunks of my brain and large clusters of blood mixed with the overwhelming aroma of this large blood surplus would eject every emotion never shown by the bastard. What a success it would be to defeat my father! Some macho man he would be as he tightly clutches the almost cold body of his only son, wet with red, staining his own clothes and carpet with memories of my death. I can also imagine the slightly glimmering eyes of the students at school who would always see me in the hallway and never speak to me, but nevertheless saw me enough for the familiarity to squeeze a slight glaze of water across their eyes. Maybe even the pretty girls will realize their lost chance and wonder what might have been with a quiet guy like me. I can see everyone's facial expressions, how distorted they would be in their mental anguish. I can hear their howls and their powerful snorts like pigs as their unstoppable noses overflow onto their upper lips. I can even smell their vomit. It would be an extravaganza of horror, and quite frankly it would be beautiful.

-The Police Officer-

April 8, 2005: Things seemed different today. They were more dis-

tinct. There was a sort of glow around everything visible, casting a haze over the whole day as if it were merely a memory. Noises were far away and irrelevant; but I struggled to hear them anyway because they were an extra zest to the odd spectacle before me, like popcorn in a movie theater—unnecessary, but a bonus pleasantry. Every small event, such as a squirrel pouncing for a nut or a school bus hissing to a halt to allow the unwilling children to board, was enhanced, yet oddly distant. These enhancements made every thing and person more beautiful and free than any other day. I was not of this world. I felt like I was a spectator in a movie theater. I was anxious for this movie to reach its climax so that I could experience the gradual plummet and eliminate the unwanted apprehension that I was feeling.

I wonder if all of this abnormal beauty was a result of the fear that this could have been the last time that I might have experienced such simple pleasures. How often I take things for granted! It's funny how it takes a hoped for grotesque image for me to realize this and experience life in such a cleansing and baptismal way. But this is the beauty that I fancied would result of today's anticipated sin.

My mind was elsewhere. My focus was one. All of this dazzling mental foreplay was just teasing me. Like any sex craving beast, I longed for the main event. Perhaps this serves as an explanation for the distance of everything average. I suppose I never have taken interest in foreplay of any type. It is just a waste of time.

Today's climax was going to be excitingly unfamiliar. So, as the final school bell rang out like a last phase of reality pushing my current mental state through a new door where rules do not apply, I became nervous. This is only natural for one's first time.

I walked to my car like a zombie with a stereotypical zombie intention. The sun was, as usual in Pike County, bright and warm, the breeze was calm and cool, and, predictably, the omnipresent screams of high-school students ruined the possibility of this serenity. But, oddly enough, the inevitable loud stereos of a high-school parking lot were somewhat comforting for the first time ever. They were always a reminder that fools are content with ignorance, and that I am beyond that; but today, for a brief moment, I was transported into the seat of one of those happy fools and experienced satisfaction of a different sort. It was pleasant; but I felt so fatuous.

Happiness is a lie that only the blind man gets to see, ignorance is happiness, and only fools believe. I would rather be smarter than them, because I can steal their smiles to paint my face, then spit on their fucking path and quicken my pace.

And so I quickened my pace, away from ignorance, and on my way to complete a mission that only a conceiver, such as me, can understand.

I approached the stoplight that leads out of the parking lot re-listing my agenda: turn right in front of the school (away from home) and drive all the way to the big hill to Pike County Road; once there I would drive outrageously until getting pulled over. All of the apparent cool kids had recently decided that this perilously curved and sloped road is perfect for racing after school; and after two wrecks, one fatal, the Pike County Police Department have taken the habit of monitoring the road. I could easily be pulled over there.

The light changed to green and I made my right turn. Step one had been accomplished. With this bold move the teasing was over and the real foreplay had just begun. I felt my sphincter muscle tighten as the reality of my future actions poured fear all over me and clouded my cognition. But it relaxed as I considered that my goal was still far enough into the future to seem like a playful intent rather than a true goal in actual pursuit. I could still change my mind, though I had no intention of doing so.

The ten minute drive seemed like an hour, and the closer I got, the more frightened I became. I was fooling myself by acting calm. I was as uneasy as a murderer about to hear the verdict; though I practically was one. "Not too late to turn back," I said aloud to myself. But, no, I had never been of the contradicting sort, and I had already decided that what I was doing would result in relief and happiness. Fate should have realized by now that I would discover a route to happiness. And so I had.

Finally, the last stop sign was before me. The narrow brown sign that says "Pike County Road" was across the street and diagonally to the left. One left turn and someone else's fate would lie within my control. I sat there thinking and debating for a period of time that, due to the thickness of my fogged cognition, I cannot recall. "Do it!" I finally screamed to myself, frustrated with my own hesitation. The scream gave me enough adrenaline to make the turn. The tires howled as I rapidly spun the car to the left. "No stopping now!" I pushed the accelerator to the floor and ascended the ominous hill. As I reached the top, trees towered over me on both sides of the road like watchtowers full of prison guards waiting to shoot any person bold enough to attempt an escape. There were nothing but these trees and a downhill destination ahead of me now. I began my descent.

I was previously unacquainted with this kind of driving. So I clung to the road like a rock climber climbing on ice. After every curve was another. For a while I felt like an average adolescent obtaining satisfaction from simple-

minded actions. The rapid speed was exhilarating. It was enough to keep my mind occupied, though, because I needed my complete focus for navigation. The possibility of dying in a car wreck had never presented itself to me before now; sloppy planning. I made a mental note to consider every angle and possible contingency next time in order to prevent unexpected death or even unexpected gratification. The fun wasn't supposed to begin until the traffic stop. Unplanned fun could blur my focus.

In the midst of trying to convince myself that I was frustrated, rather than amused, by the excitement of this real life theme park ride, it happened. I saw the reflection of the red and blue lights on my dashboard. It seemed as if time stopped and all gravity was sucked through a vacuum. All noises became muffled. I felt like I had just driven into an abstract painting; everything had an indistinct shape and my emotions were a part of this indistinctiveness. I was floating around in the painting with no depth perception or emotional arousal; only fear. In the distance, just beyond the wavy horizon was a red sun surrounded by incomprehensible, but visible, heat rays. These rays blanketed my face with a familiar heat that sucked me back into reality. Then time started again. I needed to be brave now. This cop's fate had been decided by me, and I intended on sealing it.

I saw him in the rearview mirror lazily exiting the car. It was just a routine stop for him. What a poor and ignorant bastard. If only he knew. He took his time approaching the car. He was ready to write a ticket to a stupid kid, patronize and scare him a bit, and then go back to his hiding spot and wait for more stupid kids.

The gun! It was time to focus. I reached into the console between the two front seats slowly and nonchalantly, as not to startle the approaching dead man, and I grasped the cold metal. I had taken this gun from the top shelf in my father's closet. This was the location that he had revealed to me in a case of emergency in which he or my mother was not present. He also taught me how to load it and to shoot it. My father's affectionate concerns were now to benefit me in another way. They were going to assist me in being God!

At this point I could not hesitate. I would only incriminate myself after displaying the weapon. I slipped it under my right thigh and left my hand on it. My whole body turned hot like an elementary child embarrassed at being scolded in front of the entire class. My stomach turned inside out, and my fear commanded my nerves to vibrate radically, causing my whole body to shake convulsively and making it difficult to hide my current emotion. But, to my fortuity, the cop would only view this as a stupid kid realizing his mistake too late.

He tapped on my window with his black club. I stared forward. Then an unfortunate contingency occurred. I spastically sucked in a large gasp of air, and as I exhaled I let out a low moan accompanied by a misty haze in my eyes. Once I realized what was happening I could no longer control my own bodily functions. My eyes forced out streams of tears. I sat there sobbing and soaking my cheeks with disappointment in myself. I could no longer see. The tears stymied my vision. I reached up with both hands to rub my eyes dry. As I did, my current grip on the gun would not cooperate and let loose. Before this was realized it was too late. The gun was exposed.

The officer stepped back and screamed something to me as he awkwardly fuddled around on his belt for his gun (Pike County policemen are not used to dealing with actual violence). Now, just trying to avoid an investigation that would probably result in my placement in a mental institution, rather than following through with my plan, I screamed to myself again: "Do it!" Everything went silent and my vision narrowed. I twisted my body to the left and, as I did, I could feel my seatbelt zip against the flesh on my neck. The sound and unpleasant feeling of this sent a shiver down my spine. As I twisted left I slammed the gun against the side window. No time for rolling it down! I aimed at the man and pulled the trigger. The gun let out an explosion and broke the intimidating and overbearingly loud silence. Glass shattered outward from the car, making spider webs of cracks and sharp edges on each remaining piece. Some pieces looked like folded sheets of paper with their disorganized wrinkles, except that they were sharp creases rather than folds; and some resembled recently disturbed water, making waves after an impact. The obstruction of this translucency made me feel as if I had destroyed an aspect of reality and crossed into a new realm, one that I had created for myself.

The officer fell to the ground making a thud, and then a clank as his right arm landed still holding his gun. All I could do was stare through the jagged movie screen of my window. The scene was horrifying. Where his face should have been was a chunky mangle of flesh and blood. He looked like a grotesque remake of a Picasso painting. His body was just lying there robbed of its life. I was the one who had stolen it, and like any successful robbery, I needed to get the hell out. But I couldn't leave yet. I needed something more. I had not yet experienced the satisfaction that I had come for. Strangely, my emotions were neutral. I could no longer cry or even feel fear. I was in Emotional Limbo.

Never faltering my stare, I opened the door and stood up. The silence had returned. But this time it wasn't so loud. It was calm and serene. This moment was my after-sex cigarette. This is what I needed! Suddenly I was

ejected from Emotional Limbo, and I began to feel glee bubbling inside me. Finally it erupted, like the gun had earlier, into a storm of uncontrollable laughter. I spun and danced around the street as I giggled like a little girl. I was exhilarated. I had controlled fate. I had been God!

The moment had to end sometime. Otherwise I would have gotten caught. Next time I would take my time and enjoy it more. But for now, I had to leave and suffice my satisfaction with the anticipation of next time.

As I climbed back into the driver's seat I felt warmth below me, and a sour stench crept up on my sense of smell. I looked down and realized that I had wet my pants. I began to laugh once more at the thrill that a moment could be so intensely intoxicating with no substance accompaniment to practically control my body itself. What a joy it was! I stuffed the gun under my seat and drove downhill slowly to avoid unwanted attention. As I drove I began making plans for my next adventure.

Paris Cityscape
Melanie Quinn

Fairy Kisses

Rachel Beverly

The suns rose slowly, pulling the chill from the air and spreading fingers of light over the ground. Their twin heat worked quickly to thaw the frost from the grass and dispel the fog that had collected during the night. In a park just outside the main dome, a little girl sat in a swing set, watching the suns rise. She sat unnaturally still for a child her age, her back straight and her head turned forward. She didn't swing, just sat with her hands resting on the swing chains, her feet crossed daintily beneath her. Brown hair spilled down her back, silky and smooth, and her yellow jumper was pristine. Slightly pointed ears poked out from behind her hair, the only sign of her mixed ancestry.

For the first time in a while, she moved. Her head turned just enough to check the time on her chronometer, her green eyes betraying just the slightest hint of anticipation. It was almost time.

The chronometer read 6.08. She held her breath, waiting for it to change. Not yet. Almost.

6.09.

A smile touched at the corners of her mouth. She was twelve years old.

Slowly, she began kicking her feet back and forth, building up momentum and listening to the wind swish past her ears as she swung. For all her maturity, she was still a little girl. And it was her birthday.

'Kyren! Hey, Kyren, over here!'

The peaceful scene was shattered as a group of children began to tromp their way noisily across the playground. Kyren turned towards them, the smile on her face replaced by her usual calm expression.

There were four of them—three boys and a girl—all of varying heights and ages. The girl wore a short skirt and a tank top. Her face was covered with makeup, although it was clear that she had not worn it long enough to master the art of applying it. She moved with an easy assurance, head high and arms swinging confidently by her sides. Just behind her and to the left walked a large boy, clearly the oldest of the children. His brown hair was cut in a crew cut and his face held beady, mean eyes. His gaze shifted constantly, checking out all directions as if he were constantly expecting trouble. The boy walking next to him was much shorter—about five years younger than the others. He had red hair and freckles and his clothes were of such odd color combinations that it was clear he had picked them out him-

self—and was not accustomed to doing so. The last boy, walking a few feet behind the others, had shaggy blonde hair and walked with his shoulders stooped. His clothes were too big for him and he wore no socks with his tennis shoes.

The girl ran ahead of the group, reaching Kyren first and throwing her arms around her friend's neck.

'Happy birthday, Kiyri! I brought you a present!' She pulled a small, crumpled package from her skirt pocket. 'Here you go!'

'Thank you, Lyra.' Kyren smiled and took the present, picking carefully at the string that was tied around it. As she picked at the present, the rest of the children caught up and gathered around, watching her as she worked. She got as far as one knot before the boy with the crew cut, tired of her careful deliberation, snatched the gift from her hand and tore the paper open.

'There. I saved us all half an hour,' he snapped, dumping the tiny glass figurine the paper had hidden into Kyren's still-out-stretched hand.

'Nash!' Lyra's gasped, horror-stricken. 'How could you?'

A shocked stillness had fallen over the group. Nash looked around at the stunned faces.

'What?'

'You're such an ass, Nash,' the boy without socks muttered, kicking at the dirt. His hands were in his pockets and he stared down at the ground, blonde hair falling in front of his face and hiding his expression.

'Shut up, Baeden. Nobody wants to hear your stupid, mama's boy crap.'

Baeden shrugged, keeping his eyes on the ground.

'That was kinda mean, though, Nash,' the red-haired boy said nervously.

'Shut up, Trist,' Nash growled. Trist's mouth instantly snapped shut.

Silence fell over the group. Everyone but Nash shifted their stance uncomfortably.

'Thank you for my present, Lyra.' Kyren finally said. 'It's beautiful.' She held the glass figurine up to the sunlight, turning it so she could study it from all angles. It was a winged fairy.

Lyra grinned happily. 'I thought you'd like it! It reminded me of you.'

A rare moment of surprise crossed Kyren's face. 'Really?'

'Yeah! It looks just like you.'

'I think so, too.' Baden glanced up from the ground just long enough to give Kyren a shy smile. 'All you need are the wings.'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah. Happy birthday and all, Kyren,' Nash said with a dismissive wave of his hand. 'So, anyway, what are we going to do today, guys?' He clapped his hands together, a gleam of anticipation flashing in his eyes.

'We have class in a few minutes,' Kyren said, slipping the glass fairy into her pocket.

Lyra shook her head. 'That's what we came out here to tell you. Mrs. Nandahyde said we could take the day off for your birthday!'

'That was nice of her.'

'Yeah,' Trist said, boldly disobeying Nash's command to 'shut-up'. 'I heard her telling my mom the other night that she felt sorry for us 'cause there are only five kids in the whole colony and we spend all our time studying. Said she was gonna lighten up on us 'cause we were all doing so good. Everyone 'cept, Nash, I mean.'

Nash smacked the young boy across the back of the head. 'Shut it, brat.'

Trist looked crushed. 'Oh! Sorry, Nash. I didn't think...'

Nash rolled his eyes. 'So, like I said, what are we gonna do? We never get a day off from school, so it has to be something totally kick-ass.'

'Kyren should decide,' Baeden said from beneath his bangs. He kicked at the ground again.

'Yeah,' Lyra agreed, looking over at her friend. 'You should decide, Kyren. What do you want to do?'

Kyren thought for a moment. '...We could go and see the field of gallifreia flowers by the creek. They just started blooming.'

Lyra smiled. 'Yeah, that sounds nice. We could pack a picnic lunch and go for a swim in the creek.'

'Yeah, I wanna do that!' Trist exclaimed, hopping up and down on his feet.

'I'll get my mom to pack us a lunch,' Baeden offered quietly.

'Great,' Lyra said. 'I'll get us a big blanket to eat on. And maybe Mom will let me borrow the camera.'

'Don't the gallifreia flowers bloom in that field close to Treacherous Cliff?' Nash's voice was all innocence.

'It's not Treacherous Cliff, you moron,' Baeden muttered. 'It's Techaross Cliff. Where Dr. Techaross found those dumb fossils he got so excited about.'

'Yeah, yeah, whatever. It's a high cliff with lots of handholds you could use to climb down it. That's all I need to know.'

Baeden looked up sharply, meeting Nash in the eye for the first time that day. 'We are not going anywhere near that cliff, Nash."

Nash's eyebrows rose in surprise. 'Well, well. Look who suddenly thinks he's in charge around here. Do you need another lesson in leadership, Baeden?' Casually, Nash lifted one hefty, balled fist up to eye-level and pretended to study it, smiling, his head cocked nonchalantly. He looked over at Baeden and let the smile turn into an ugly grin. 'Well, mama's boy?'

Baeden's flash of courage dissipated. He stared at the large, ham-like fist for a long moment and then swallowed weakly, letting his shoulders slump and his gaze fall back to the ground. Hands still in his pockets, he started kicking at the dirt again.

'Well?' Nash pressed.

Baeden ground his teeth and kicked the dirt harder. 'No, Nash,' he said in a low, angry voice. 'I don't need another lesson.'

Nash's laugh was ugly. 'Didn't think so.'

* * *

It was about an hour later before the five of them reached the field of gallifreia flowers. Baden carried a picnic basket and Lyra had a large blanket tossed over one shoulder. Kyren carried a basket to collect flowers in.

'Oh, it's beautiful!' Lyra exclaimed, tossing the blanket down and running out into the middle of the field. 'There must be a million of them!' She spun around and around, trying to take in the whole scene at once. The yellow and pink flowers stretched nearly as far as the eye could see. A small creek meandered through the heart of the field, trees dotting its banks.

The rest of the group gathered at the edge of the field, watching Lyra as she pranced around, shouting with joy and leaving a trail of crushed flowers in her wake.

After Lyra settled down, they found a level stretch of ground to spread out the blanket and started passing around plates and cups. Baeden grabbed the picnic basket and began pulling out containers.

'These are all my favorite foods,' Kyren said, eyebrows up, as he pulled out the last covered bowl.

'I know.' Baeden's face lit up when Kyren smiled at him.

'Awww, how cute,' Nash said through a mouth full of ham and cheese. Baeden's face sunk immediately.

Lyra rolled her eyes. 'You know what, Nash,' she snapped, tossing a potato chip at his head. 'You are a complete jackass. Why don't you just shut the hell up for once? Nobody wants to hear anything you've got to say, anyway.'

Nash's face clouded over dangerously. 'You better be glad you're a girl, Lyra. Otherwise, I'd beat your face in for that.'

'Oh, gee, using violence to solve your problems—How original.' Lyra had to dodge the sandwich Nash hurled at her head.

'You're not getting another sandwich,' Baeden told him.

Nash shrugged. 'Oh, well.' He reached over and calmly plucked Trist's sandwich right out of the boy's hands.

'Hey!' Trist yelled, snatching uselessly at the sandwich. Nash ignored him and took a large bite.

'Jackass,' Baeden muttered under his breath, pulling one of his own sandwiches out of the picnic basket and handing it to Trist.

'Thank you, Baeden,' Trist said, scooting a few feet away from Nash before taking a bite.

* * *

They went swimming after they ate and then stretched out in the grass to dry. The warmth from the suns mixed with the scent of the flowers, spreading a heavy aroma over the air. Bees droned around them and the creek gurgled pleasantly. It wasn't long before all five were fast asleep.

Baeden awoke to a sharp pain in his side.

'Don't kick him!' he heard Lyra shout as he rolled over and groaned. Hands grabbed him by the shirt and dragged him to his feet.

'Get your ass up, mama's boy. We don't got all day.'

'What?'

'Jesus, you're so dumb. We've been waiting for you for, like, half an hour.'

'That's not true, Nash,' Kyren said, her voice low and controlled. 'You've only been awake for ten minutes.'

'Oh, how sweet. Wittle Kwren is sticking up fo her boyfwend.'

'Shut *up*!' Baeden shouted furiously, fully awake. He punched at Nash's chest with both hands and struggled to free himself from the grip on his shirt. 'Shut your stupid face, you stupid, *fat* son of a—*ooufh!*'

Baeden dropped to the ground, coughing weakly, one arm wrapped around his stomach.

'You shut your mouth, you little snot. Now get up. We're going to Treacherous Cliff.'

'No,' Baeden growled, his voice raspy. Nash kicked him.

'That wasn't a question, ass-wipe. On your feet.'

'Nash...' Lyra's voice held a pleading note.

'Shut it, Lyra. I'll kick your ass, too. Don't think I won't.'

Lyra paled and snapped her mouth shut.

'Get up, Baeden. We're going.'

'No. *–oouffh!* Alright, alright! I'm getting up. Just lay off.' Baeden struggled painfully to his feet, one arm wrapped around his aching stomach. His shoulders were slumped as much with defeat as with pain. Fixing his eyes back on the ground, he muttered, 'You win, Nash. As usual. Let's just go.'

Nash laughed. 'Yeah, that's what I thought, punk.' Baeden winced as Nash slapped him hard on the back. 'Quick. I wanna get back before it gets dark.'

Baeden gave the ground a frustrated kick. When he spoke, his voice was strained. 'Kyren, do you mind taking the picnic basket back with you? I don't want to lug it all the way up the mountain.'

Kyren opened her mouth to reply, but Nash quickly cut her off. 'Hey, no! We're all going to the cliff. Together.'

Baeden glanced up in surprise. 'No way! It's Kyren's birthday. She gets to do whatever she wants! And I know she doesn't want to follow you arou—'

'Shut up!'

Teeth gnashing, Baeden forced his gaze back down to the ground.

'Let's go,' Nash snapped. 'I'm sick of arguing with you losers. Somebody get Trist up. That little brat could sleep through a mogleif.' No one moved. 'Jesus, do I have to get him up? Cause I don't think he's gonna like it.'

Sullenly, Lyra moved toward the still-sleeping boy. 'Leave him alone, Nash,' she said. 'He's just a little kid.'

'Yeah, a little pain-in-the-ass kid.'

It took some coaxing to get Trist up, and by the time they set out for the cliff, Nash was in a particularly bad mood. He marched ahead of the group, setting a quick pace for someone his size and making the others walk double-time to keep up with him—they had shorter legs.

Baeden fell behind to walk beside Kyren.

'I'm sorry your birthday is being ruined.'

Kyren smiled at him. 'It's not your fault. Thank you for sticking up for me.'

'You don't have to thank me. I did a crappy job of it, anyway.'

'No you didn't. And I do thank you.'

Baeden's shrugged, refusing to look at her. 'Whatever.'

* * *

They walked for about fifteen minutes—all sharply up hill—to reach

Techaross Cliff. It was a hard trek, but once they made it, the view was spectacular. The cliff was shear and looked out over the same valley they had come from. The vast expanse of gallifreia flowers stretched out below them, spreading in all directions, making the ground itself appear golden.

'Oh, it's beautiful,' Lyra gasped, stepping to the edge of the cliff. 'Just look at that.'

'We're not here to look, we're here to climb.'

Lyra rolled her eyes. 'Fine, Nash. Climb away. I'm going to keep admiring the view.'

The older boy scowled at her but didn't reply. Instead, he peered over the edge of the cliff, searching for starting handholds.

'Kay, this is gonna be awesome. We can make it down to the next ledge just fine.'

'I don't know why you keep saying "we",' Lyra said. '"We" aren't climbing anywhere. You are. We're just here to laugh when you fall.'

'Well, duh, you aren't going to climb down. A girl could never climb down a cliff.'

'I could so climb down a cliff! I just have enough sense not to.'

'You could not!'

'Could so!'

'Could not!'

'Could----oh, God, forget it. It's like having a conversation with a seven-year-old.'

'Hey!' Trist protested.

'Sorry, Trist. You're right. More like a three-year-old.'

Nash glowered angrily and smacked his fist into his palm. 'Be glad you're a girl, Lyra. Real glad.'

Lyra stuck her tongue out at him.

Angrily, Nash spun back towards the cliff, abandoning the conversation in favor of relocating the handholds he had planned to use.

'Get over here, Baeden,' he snapped, shooting a glance in the boy's direction.

Baeden winced at the sound of his own name. Hands shoved in his pockets, he slowly abandoned his place at the periphery of the group and walked towards the edge of the cliff.

'What?'

'You're going first.'

'What?'

'Come on—feet first, get moving.'

'Nash, I don't think...'

'Now.'

Baeden's jaw tightened. 'Fine. If I break my neck, at least I won't have to deal with you any more.' He sat down at the edge of the cliff, groaning despite himself at the pain the movement shot through his bruised ribs. Feet dangling over the edge, he forced himself not to look down.

'Okay...here goes...'

'Don't do it, Baeden.' Kyren spoke up for the first time since reaching the cliff. Baeden looked over at her in surprise. She actually looked frightened. 'Please, don't. It's a really long way down. I don't like it. You could get hurt.'

Baeden shot a wry glance at Nash. 'I think I'll probably get hurt worse if I don't go.'

Heart pounding in his chest, Baeden turned over onto his stomach and slid slowly over the edge. Carefully, he began to work his way down. *Hand, foot, foot, hand.* He had barely made it three feet below the cliff-edge before the screaming pain in his side left him breathless and shaking.

'You're not looking so good, Bae,' Lyra said from the cliff-top, her voice concerned.

' 'm fine,' Baeden grunted, scrambling for another hand-hold. Sweat dripped into his eyes.

'You're not fine. Why don't you come----*oh!*'

Baeden felt the world drop out from under him. His stomach lurched sickeningly as his sweaty fingers lost their grip. Before it even occurred to him to scream, he-----stopped.

Baeden stared at the cliff wall in front of him, eyes wide with shock. It had stopped moving. He was dangling in mid-air.

'Wha—?' He felt pressure on his right wrist. Barely daring to move, he glanced up. 'Kyren...'

She was flat on her stomach, dangling dangerously far over the edge, clasping his wrist with both hands. Her eyes were squeezed shut with effort.

It took a second for the others to react and after they did it was quite a while longer before they managed to haul the boy back up the cliff.

Baeden resisted the urge to kiss the ground as he lay sprawled face-down across it, panting weakly.

'Jesus, Baeden,' Nash gasped beside him. 'You can't even climb right.'

'I know, I know. I'm a loser, I suck, etc., etc.' Baeden didn't even bother to turn his head, just spoke into the dirt.

'You *are* a loser and you *do* suck, stupid mama's boy. Now get up. We've gotta find a better spot to climb down.'

Baeden looked up sharply. 'You are not serious.'

'Don't start this shit. Just get up and let's go.' Nash climbed to his feet and stared down at Baeden expectantly.

'No! *No*.' Baeden punched the ground in frustration and scrambled to his feet. 'This game is over. We are going home. You wanna stay and kill yourself, go ahead. We're done. Come on, guys.' He turned to march away, the others scrambling to follow.

Nash caught up to him in two seconds flat, whirled him around by the arm, and punched Baeden square in the face. The impact knocked the boy off his feet. He hit the ground hard, arms automatically covering his face to protect from further blows. Nash reared back a foot, as if to kick him.

'Stop it, Nash!' Lyra shouted, fear in her voice. 'Just stop.'

Nash hesitated, glaring over at her. 'What did you say?'

'I—uh—I said..." Lyra hesitated, swallowing weakly.

'Yeah, that's what I thought you said.' He drew his foot back again.

'No!!'

Nash froze, eyes wide with surprise. That hadn't been Lyra. He looked over at the unexpected source of the voice in disbelief.

'Trist?'

The red-headed boy looked as surprised by what he had said as every one else did. He stood next to Kyren, fear on his face. As Nash's expression clouded over, Kyren silently pulled the little boy behind her, shielding him with her body.

'You just made a mistake, brat,' Nash growled, forgetting Baeden and taking a step toward Trist. 'You're not a girl. You I can hit. Move, Kyren.'

Kyren stood still, her face as calm as ever.

'I said move.'

Kyren didn't even blink.

'Fine. If that's the way you want it...'

Nash barely made it three steps before he was tackled from behind. Baeden hit him at waist level, wrapping his arms around Nash's waist and knocking him to the ground.

'Whattha—' was all Nash managed before his face hit the dirt. The two struggled for a moment, exchanging kicks and punches, but Nash was much stronger. He quickly had Baeden pinned on the ground.

'*Jesus*, Baeden, do you *want* me to kill you?'

Baeden struggled furiously, twisting to try and bite the hands that

held down his wrists.

Nash laughed. 'You even fight like a mama's boy!' He was still laughing when the rock connected with the side of his head.

* * *

Kyren dropped the rock on the ground, hands shaking. At her feet, Nash groaned, stunned by the blow. Her face was still calm, but something in Kyren's eyes said she was close to panicking.

Baeden quickly disentangled himself from Nash, staggering slightly as he stood. He didn't say anything. No one did. They all just stared down at Nash in stunned silence.

'W--what...' Lyra finally stammered. 'Kyren, you...'

'I know.'

On the ground, Nash stirred, groaning again.

'Oh, boy. Okay, we've got to get out of here,' Baeden snapped, taking a few steps backwards. 'Come on, guys. He's gonna be pissed.'

As if to confirm Baeden's words, Nash gave a low growl and started trying to push himself up.

That was all the convincing the others needed. Lyra grabbed the picnic basket and Baeden pulled Trist onto his back, piggy-back style, to keep the boy's short legs from slowing them down. They took off down the side of the mountain, not once looking back.

* * *

Nash recovered just in time to watch them disappear. He dragged himself into a sitting position and stared at the spot he had last seen them, furry and confusion playing across his face. Pounding the ground with his fist, he shouted a few belated obscenities after them. He could feel his power over them fading with every passing second. It made him mad. Or was he mad? When he got mad, his heart pounded and burned. This...was more of an ache...

Sitting all alone in the dirt, Nash felt a single hot tear slide down his cheek.

* * *

Kyren sat in the grass by the playground, arms wrapped around her knees, staring up at the stars. She sat unnaturally still for a child her age, her back straight and her head turned forward. Brown hair spilled down her back, silky and smooth, and her pink pajamas were pristine.

'How do you stay so still all the time?' Baeden asked beside her. He was stretched back in the grass, hands tucked behind his head.

'How do you constantly keep moving?' Kyren replied, her eyes still

fixed on the stars.

'Good point.'

They fell silent. The only sounds were the chirping of the vergessas, an occasional birdcall, and the ever-present electronic hum of the dome.

'I'm sorry your birthday was ruined,' Baeden said after a while.

'It wasn't ruined.'

Baeden laughed. 'You don't think that was ruined?'

'No.'

'Why on Mernesa not?'

Kyren was silent for a long moment, eyes fixed on the stars. 'Because,' she finally said. 'You tried so hard to make it perfect. It made me happy.'

Baeden felt his cheeks turn pink. '...Oh.'

Without warning, Kyren lay back in the grass beside Baeden resting her head on the arm he automatically stretched out. Baeden tried not to blush as she looked over at him, her face so close he could feel her breath.

'Um...' he stammered, quickly turning his gaze back up to the stars.

Kyren smiled. 'Thank you, Baeden.'

Despite himself, Baeden turned to meet her eyes. 'I, uh—no-no problem.'

Self-consciously, he looked back up at the sky. For a long time, they were quiet.

'...Well,' Baeden said after a while, his cheeks back to their normal color. 'Perfect day or not, Nash is still gonna beat the crap out of me tomorrow. I just hope he doesn't bother you.'

'I don't want to talk about Nash.' Kyren's voice was a little sharper than usual. Baeden felt her tense slightly beside him.

'Oh. ...Sorry...'

'It's okay. It's just that I only have eight more hours left in my birthday, and I don't want to spend them thinking about him. We'll deal with Nash tomorrow—together. I'm not going to stand by and watch him hit you any more.'

'You don't have to do that.'

'I want to. He can't fight all of us.'

'...Maybe not.'

'He can't.'

'I hope you're right.'

'I am.'

As Baeden considered this prospect, he felt a weight lift off his chest.

Despite himself, he sighed in relief. There was a chance that things were going to change. Just a chance, but that was more than he'd ever had before.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he pulled Kyren to him and kissed her lightly on the lips. Her eyes were wide with surprise at first, but then they slid closed and she kissed back. It only lasted a second, but to them, it felt like a lifetime. They stared at each other silently for a long moment when they separated, then finally turned their gazes back to the stars.

'Now,' Kyren said, pulling closer to Baeden and resting her head against his shoulder, 'it really is a perfect birthday.'

Untitled
Rachel Hendrix

Rara Avis

Gare Linley

It was dark, even the music coming from the water tinkling onto the three copper layers of the garden fountain was lifeless. It was a place I didn't want to be, sitting next to her on that bench in front of the library. The night wasn't especially cold or windy; it was actually quite mellow for summer. But that bench, that place where we were, was, for several minutes, the one place in the world that had no happiness whatsoever. I wanted to leave, to get up and walk away. But there was just no other place I wanted to be than beside her. There was no other sound I wanted to hear than that of her voice. I knew I was going to die when I left, so I wanted her face to be the last face I ever saw.

She had this light that captivated me. It held onto me from the first time I laid eyes on her. She had an unfamiliar beauty – kind of clumsy but poetic. Like a strange bird that got lost during migration and landed where its kind had never been. I still can't be sure what drew the two of us together, whatever it was is only remembered as a shadow, a shimmer of darkness against the moon. Maybe it could be attributed to youthful fantasies – or delusions of maturity. I had a wife, but I was only 21. She was 19, about to graduate high school, set on going to Montevallo, for college, conquering the world through her writing and finding someone to love. Me, I was happy to be getting out of a bad situation. I saw in her a new hope; I saw something that made me curious. I saw my escape. The deeper we got into each other, the greater the danger became. The idea of destroying something to create something bigger and brighter intrigued me.

There were so many nights in those dorm rooms that I screamed for my son. That I screamed for my soul. Her voice was the only comfort I offered myself in the dark. She stood with me the day of my prophecy: On Main Quad, near the bird bath, it felt like we were the only people in the world that had ever stood in that spot. I looked at her and told her I was home – that I had found my destiny and along the way that I had found my soul mate. We had many instants of prophetic illusion about our future in our best moments. Our worst moments were forgotten. Their memory haunts me. At night they become human, they reach out for me.

I knew I could ration out, somehow, that leaving my wife and son to follow her would someday make sense to me. I tried so many times to justify it to myself that I fashioned it its own reality. We, actually fashioned this reality,

and in this we thrived. She was, in the beginning, too naïve to realize what she was doing, and I was too arrogant and scared of myself to tell her. The realization for her came at an unexpected moment, I think. I was on one knee and holding her hand as I slid the ring onto her finger, asking the obvious question. She was at work, in the middle of summer. She cried when she saw the diamond, and I still lead myself to believe it was because the ring was pretty. It was one year to the day of our engagement that the world fell to pieces on top of me. The pieces that lay heavier than life are still there on the living room floor of a house in Hoover. I knew the second that it left her mouth that the point was unarguable. I knew it was what needed to happen. It wasn't a resistance on my part, just an unsureness of life I think. My reality had just ended. Hers had ended a long time ago, she told me. She offered me no concrete reason for breaking up, just an apology and the ring. The coconut I bought earlier lay smashed and dry next to the other groceries still in their bags on the kitchen counter. "I couldn't get it open with a knife" she said, "so I used a hammer". I had gotten back from the grocery store earlier, then washed her car. I went inside to find the coconut lying on the counter in a wreck. I looked at her quizzically and asked her if she wanted to go to the movies. "No", she said, "I want to break up". I stared blankly at her, and she began to cry. "I'm sorry", she said between sobs. "This is just what I want. I think it's what we both need". She moved toward me, like she was seeking reassurance from somebody – I recoiled and told her to get away from me. I went upstairs.

* * *

We sat there on the bench for nearly two hours. She cut through the silence by turning to me and saying: "this is it; things will never be the same". I was at a loss for words, and simply nodded my head. Later we left. I went home, to my mom's house. There were countless days that summer that I tried so hard to tell myself she was gone. But I couldn't force my brain to understand. She had been my life for three years, I knew, knew that I could beg or plead or scream at her and she would come back. We could forget this had ever happened and pick up where we left off. Or we could remember what had happened and joke about it in four months…laugh about it like we watched two silly kids fight over the shiny toy at the bottom of the box. Because with us, it was never real – it was altered. It was a slanted state of being. Like living inside your own mind. It was comfortable, of course, because the world moved around us always. But it wasn't real.

That night was the last day of class for May Term, 2002. After that I went home for the summer. When I came back that fall, what she had said to

me was true. Everything was different. The trees were different – they didn't bend quite the same way they did the first time I looked at them. The air smelled different – there wasn't a hint of freedom on it anymore. Everything reminded me of her. Everything. Walking across campus, I saw the birdbath where we stood on our first day of college. I can stand at Comer and look across the street at Hill House, where I met her after the first day of classes were over, and kissed her beside the tree – the one closest to the sidewalk stairs across the street. I can go to Napier, to my old room, and relive the fights and the naps and the sex that lasted for hours, but there's only the whisper of fluorescent lights now. I can close my eyes and remember the night I took my favorite picture of her; sitting on her bunk bed in Main and smoking a cigarette, her hair all over the place and her head slightly tilted but her eyes, those hypnotizing sea green-white eyes focused on me through the hair and smoke, staring at me – the picture back dropped by an MC Escher drawing of stairs leading up to heaven, or down to hell. The blue bedspread twisted and wrapped around her waist but her skinny, bare feet poking out from underneath. I can watch the smoke in the picture curling up around her head, spread out like a wreath or hanging like an omen. "Smoke follows beauty", I told her. After that picture, we drank tequila with her roommate. She vomited spaghetti in the sink, and cleaned it out with her hands. Scooping out handfuls of the reddish-grey sick and putting it into a brown paper sack that she sat on the floor. I go to the grocery store and walk past the produce section, and the day we took acid and went shopping glares at me. "The fruit is all square!" I hear her say.

"I think you're right...ah shit...it's looking at us! The fucking kiwis are looking at us!"

It was what defined us. The childish glance at the world, that we are all alone, just us. With nobody to tell us that we were so very wrong. The slant begins to lean and lean and lean and then falls over. I've wished that I could un-remember. Not forget, because in forgetting the scar is still there, it's only the connection that is severed. There was so much between us that time can't erase. However cliché that sounds, clichés are there for a reason.
Even now it still has the sensation of just happening. It is the only thing that makes me feel anymore. The pain is so real it's pliable. It is organic, with a mind of its own. It moves in and out of my mind and body with incredible speed. Like a worm in loose dirt, hunting for a patch of unmoved soil, fresh with the requirements to better propagate its reproduction. Her presence in my mind still lingers, it won't shake free despite my feeble attempts to be rid of it.

We don't talk anymore. It's best, I suppose. We tried that comforting "let's be friends", but the only thing we could be was jealous. We've both changed, however superficially. The elemental parts are still there though. In the long conversations we had after the fact, but before we gave up, I could see that. Or, feel it more than see it. She has moved, gone to another state to become a master of English – the only thing she ever had, she said, that set her free. But we both know we can never be free of each other. In the dark, alone or with a lover, a haunting comes into our minds of a place we were once. It became a shadow that can never be shaken off, a proverbial red letter A hung around our hearts and minds. A dirty secret that everyone knows. Something that takes away the roundness of things.

Since that night, my imagination has been frozen. Like my thoughts were bent around something I couldn't move out of the way. It's the first time I have been really able to talk about it, without rehashing the same old tired story of us. It came as an epiphany of sorts...I fell in love for the first time since her. Its almost familiar, watching the emerald and scarlet flare out of things. It makes me feel. Not the slanted, crooked way I did with her. But feel the roundness of things, like an orange.

Dreaming in Terms of Crimson Water

John Lake Moss

When I was but a boy, living in a house in which I had never lived, a disaster came to me, one night while I was cleaning my bedroom. Lying beneath my bed, I furiously scraped the hardened, plaster-like mud from the guitar case. As I diligently worked, my younger brother—a little boy four years my junior—kept me company with conversation from above my toil, from his perch on the bed. As I worked. Then I reached for the water-spigot on the far wall. The room revealed no striking features: the parallelepiped consisted of four white walls that held my world, a ceiling that I did not see, and a hardwood floor that was covered with crimson carpet to within a foot or two of each wall. The four walls contained the crimson sea of carpet without yielding, without relenting, without so much as wavering; the room was a world whose four hardwood beaches kept a crimson pool.

In the wall that stood across from the wall of the spigot, there was a door. Before I had entered my bedroom, I had come from a nondescript room into a short hallway that ended at the wall surrounding that bedroom door. Two or three steps from the threshold that led to my crimson pool, to my work, to my mud-plastered guitar case, and to the company of my brother, a portal to the living-room opened into the hall, from the left. I had stopped at the junction—first peering into the room at my left, and then surveying the open bedroom door before me. I had seen, in the living room at my left, both my father sleeping on a couch that hugged the inside of the wall with the portal and my mother reading as she sat in a chair at the back of the room; I had heard a TV droning from out of nowhere. The TV lit the room.

I had entered the open door before me; I had closed it behind me.

...conversation from above, from his perch on the bed. As I worked. Then I reached for the water-spigot on the far wall. I turned its valve until the spigot yielded a steady flow of water. The water did not gush—I made sure of that. I was always careful. Where did my brother go? I worked in silence. The plastered mud fell from the guitar case. I worked in silence. The floor at the far end of the crimson sea was only a bit wet with water from the open spigot, and then I was standing in water above my ankles. I was a little boy, and I cried—a foot of destructive water everywhere.

The door to my room opened easily enough. Miraculously, the standing water within my room had exerted little effect on the world without my room—the disaster had only yielded a damp patch in the hallway carpet at the

threshold of my bedroom door. My door. I had occasionally used my door to shut out my angry father. And he was going to be angry about the water-spigot flood. I was still crying. I always cried when I accidentally. Many times I had accidentally. I still accidentally as an adult. I had accidentally flooded my room with water from a water-spigot that shouldn't even be in my room. Why was there a water-spigot in my room? Why did I turn it on? I had barely turned the valve. It wasn't my fault; the drain must be closed. It wasn't my fault; the damage was done.

The door to my room had opened easily enough. Dad was asleep. Good. I want my mom. Verb tenses change; the need for someone to make it all right does not. My mom followed me back to my room to survey the damage. Weren't the walls white? They were now unpainted sheetrock. Unpainted sheetrock with water stains that ran, from the floor, two feet up the wall. Or maybe it was half a meter. In any case, I was choking on my sobs. The walls were unpainted sheetrock because we had yet to finish the repairs from the last time I did this. The crimson carpet was still damp. I bawled. My mom made up a bed for me in the floor, because my bed had suddenly vanished; everything always suddenly vanishes. The room was now empty; rooms always end up empty. I sobbed as I lay in the bed on the floor. The floor was no longer damp, but my cheeks were. Tears are so much like blood. My mom read to me; my tears slowed their pace. My eyelids are getting heavy. Verb tenses change; the need for someone to make it all right does not. My mom asked me if I wanted her to stay; I nodded my sleepy-little-boy's head as an affirmative signal. My eyelids were closed. She made up a bed for herself between her little boy and the doorway. I had been crying—I knew I would sleep well.

Pentimento

Rebecca Dempsey

Everyone is finished eating, but not drinking--not by a long shot. No one seems to be in a hurry, however. Bottles sit corked and half-full of red wine on a white damask tablecloth, and the glasses are almost empty. There's no hurry about refilling them. We have the rest of the warm, lazy afternoon to do as we please.

It's the kind of day one wishes would last forever--sailing this morning on the silvery blue Seine, and then coming in to have lunch on a balcony of the hotel. Good conversation. The weather is warm, but there is a hint of gold in the trees. The thin gray line of the railroad tracks shows in the distance, across the river where white sails look like miniature toys.

I'm not sure about the man with the muscular arms wearing a sleeveless white boating shirt. Fun doesn't seem to be on his agenda. That's Alphonse, son of the proprietor. He stands at the edge of the group gazing at a tree that grows close to the hotel, as if he has something else on his mind. He and one other man in a white boating shirt are about the only ones who aren't dressed too warmly for the weather. They are both wearing straw hats. The other man is straddling a chair backwards. He has an open, honest-looking face and wears his flat-rimmed straw hat back on his head at a jaunty angle. The man with the big arms has a beard and wears his hat lower on his forehead. He is standing very close behind a woman sitting at the table, but they're not paying any attention to each other at all. She's holding her rather musty smelling dog while it sits on the edge of the table, and playing with it like you would a baby, pursing her lips and talking childlike to it.

"Oh, that's a good doggy. Give Mommy a kiss."

She is a dressmaker, and it is evident in her beautiful black dress that is trimmed in white lace and garnet colored silk. Her hat is straw, with a colorful band of material around it and red flowers perched on the brim.

The remains of lunch are on the table. Clusters of grapes, peaches and wedges of melons sit in the middle. A young woman in a dark green dress with a lacy collar leans forward with her arm on the table talking to the man in the jaunty straw hat. Her plate is clean; maybe she wasn't hungry. Curly auburn hair frames her face that has a faintly inquiring look on it. Pearl earbobs hang from her ears and her red lips are slightly pursed as if she is waiting for the answer to her question.

"Isn't leisure time a good thing, Gustave?"

He takes his time answering, gazing across the table at the dressmaker. "Yes, in small doses. But work, especially for an artist, can change the world, or at least make people think about the world."

"Think! You artists do too much thinking," she pouts. "You have a fortune, Gustave, and many gentlemen in your position simply enjoy life, at their leisure."

"Yes. Well, personally I think they would be happier if they spent at least a part of their time striving towards something. Not necessarily art--that depends on the individual."

Standing behind Angele is a young man in a beige sweater. Both arms braced on a chair back, he leans towards them to hear what they are saying. He's good-looking, with slightly tousled dark hair and high cheekbones. He's gazing down at her, and if she looked up, she would see the admiration in his eyes. He's the Italian journalist, Maggiolo.

* * *

The smell of the ripe fruit mingles with the women's perfume in the warm air, along with the faint scent of garlic. The breeze ripples the red and gold awning over our heads. I want to be a part of this interesting group of people, but in a strange way, I'm not. A young woman sits in a chair in the middle of the balcony, drinking from a glass of wine. Maybe she feels alone, too. But no, there is a young man in a moustache talking to her. I didn't see him before--he was hidden behind the journalist.

The daughter of the proprietor leans forward from the waist and props her arms on the wooden railing. One hand supports her chin as she talks to a man seated facing her. He is dressed in a brown suit and hat. I can't see his face. She is very young, and her dark brown eyes have a light-hearted look. Her white blouse has a sailor collar and red trim, and her straw hat doesn't have any flowers on it, only a bright blue band running around the crown.

"Alphonsine, I suppose you meet all kinds of people here, since the railroad has made your place more accessible," he said.

"Yes, I do, Baron."

He interrupted her. "Please, call me Raoul."

"Raoul, many people who are well traveled, such as yourself, come here to enjoy the scenery and have a good meal. I have not been able to travel as yet, but they bring the world to me, and serve it up on a silver platter. Tell me about Saigon, when you were mayor there..."

* * *

Over by the railing, a man in a top hat and black suit stands with his back to the group, chatting with a bookish looking younger man with glasses

who is dressed more casually. He is smoking a cigarette, standing with his back to the railing. I move around the table, around the small clusters of people, closer to the two men.

"Jules, I believe the free will of man is a gift given to us by the creator. By our decisions, we make our own destiny. The potential of the human soul is unlimited," said the man in the top hat.

"I agree that the potential is unlimited, Monsieur Ephrussi, but it is the physical and material world that is binding. You are speaking of the very fortunate. What of a baby that dies in infancy? Or a person who is afflicted with madness? There is no chance to explore his potential. Even a physical handicap can stifle one's free will up to a degree--but only to a degree."

"Good point. A writer can write even if he can't walk, but what if a person doesn't want to write? If he wants to climb mountains, his will is subject to his impairment."

"It is one's opportunity that makes the difference, not free will alone, Monsieur Ephrussi."

A few feet away from these two men stands a group of three, two men and a woman. One man has his arm about the woman's waist. She is dressed very fashionably--black suit with white showing at the collar and cuffs, black gloves, black hat. She has her hands over her ears as if the two men have just told a bawdy joke. Or is she just straightening her hat? The man who has his arm around her looks solicitous, his head bent towards her. The other man, a bureaucrat, looks like he has just taken a deep breath and is prepared to expound on something.

I move over to the railing again. When I draw near to one of the small groups of people, they look right through me as if I am not here. . In all this time that we've been out here on the balcony, the light hasn't changed. The atmosphere of the warm summer afternoon is endless, making a pulsing tapestry of their lively bread.

All the people move to pour more wine, and then settle down to resume their conversations. As for me, I look down and my dress is dissolving into a different color. It's sash is caught by the breeze; it floats out and simply disappears. My vision is obscured gradually--the light becomes dim. I'm the girl who got painted out.

Mr. Rothman's Bees

Treasure Ingels-Thompson

The light played tricks on my eyes that late spring day, darting back and forth across the lawn as objects—birds, clouds, planes, obstructed its continuity. No other action occurred on the quiet street that passed my house. Small-town, rural Alabama lay as quiet on a Saturday as most people might assume, and I reveled in it. Feeling as if I were the sole inhabitant of the entire planet, I found myself unafraid. A memory of watching *The Omega Man* late one might when no one else stirred in my childhood home played cinematically in my mind, making me think of the fear that solitary existence had once evoked in me. I was a child then, totally dependent on my parents and siblings for love, support, and acceptance. Now, a woman of nineteen, I made my way to the library and hoped that the quiet, unassuming day would proceed without interruption.

The houses in this section of town were stately and respectable. Two-story Victorians lined either side of the street in uniform predictability. On the left, an imposing house painted grey with black shutters set the standard of understatement and reticence. I had often tried to imagine the couple who lived within that home now and found myself sad to know that these two must be both bland and dreary, confined in a home as decorative as a cardboard box.

Many years before, a large family had lived within this home. Then, it had been painted a daring shade of peach that reflected the vibrancy of its inhabitants. The lawn had been strewn with big-wheel tricycles, sand toys, and baby dolls. Laughter had poured from the windows and music had boomed through the screened door of the back porch where the teenaged daughter had giggled on the phone or studied for her classes. The house had seemed alive, nearly kinetic on its own, possessed by the energies it derived from the family who thrived there. Passing that house, I missed those kids and wondered what had ever become of them. It was ironic, really, for we had never interacted more profoundly than the occasional nod or grunt as I passed in the afternoons coming home from school. They had been a force to reckon with, though, and had added something to the neighborhood. Now, I wondered what had happened to them.

Walking beneath the tall oak trees that reached to touch each other across the one lane road, I imagined the sunlight raining down on me in dappled droplets. The grey house resembled an appaloosa as it was spotted dark-

ly in some places by the shadows that were cast from the oak leaves. I tried to imagine it as such—a frolicking, kicking appaloosa—and found that it was impossible to carry the thought to any logical end. The house was imposing, that much was true, but it was also deadly silent and totally without personality.

This house and its lackluster appearance were standard for the neighborhood. Generically comfortable and showing the stringent lack of imagination of the inhabitants, the house was without a garden and without a soul. I listened to the singing of birds that seemed quite far away from me and proceeded in my walk to the library. I would write today, if I could think of anything worth putting to paper. I would write, dream, imagine, and create an alternative to this humdrum existence.

Nearing the Rothmans' house just one block from my own, I could hear the usual melodic whistling of Mr. Rothman as he tended his honeybees in the side yard of his rambling home. Mr. Rothman was one person who could come into my quiet, pleasant, solitary day without disrupting it. I knew he would wave and mumble a good morning from beneath the net and hat that protected him from his buzzing pets. Then he would turn his back again and continue his therapeutic work. The age of my own grandfather, Mr. Rothman occupied a space in my heart even as he relished his own privacy and did not infringe on mine. I looked forward to passing him as he worked and had stopped on numerous occasions to speak as he and his wife, Julie, enjoyed the diminishing southern heat of twilight from their front porch.

This morning, I noticed the effects of Mr. Rothman's increasing age. He hunched a little as he worked. Even his whistle rasped some. I thought about going to him and asking if he needed anything. Clearing my throat a little to draw his attention, I smiled as he straightened his back and found me with his feeble eyes. "Good morning, Mr. Rothman, "I called in my friendliest voice. "Does it look like a good year for honey?" I knew very little about honey, only what Mr. Rothman had shared from this distance on other occasions, but always made an effort to ask politely what I knew he would answer even if I had not asked.

"A good year? Well I don't really know yet, Charm Child," he called back flirtingly, causing me to smile. He was, I felt sure, the only person who found me charming at all—more proof of the benefits of s surface relationship. "It's rained accordingly, though, and the garden is lovely." I knew, of course, that the garden was his ultimate priority and that he looked to his bees as friendly workers who kept his garden productive. He had told me more than once that he and the bees and the garden enjoyed a symbiotic relationship.

His garden was the one place in this neighborhood that brimmed with life and activity. Hydrangeas, fed by the otherwise oppressive humidity, grew in puffing bouquets of cornflower blue, snow white, and even a decadent shade of fuchsia. Along the edges of the trim yard, daffodils, crocuses, and narcissae proclaimed themselves in charming yellows and fading, demure creamy-whites. Roses—elegant and unabashedly sensuous—extended themselves in paths along the trellises and shutters. In one spot, a birdbath could be seen through clusters of floral offerings that burst and regressed into layers upon and beneath other layers of color and light that played tricks on the eyes like something from an impressionist's painting.

Even as these flowers bloomed and subsided, revealing other mysteries in their youth and then aging layers, they were not the driving force within this garden. In the far corner of the yard, shaded by a tall fence that was green and lovely with the moss of its age, a pillar of boxes rose from the ground and was surrounded by its worshippers—throngs of buzzing honeybees. Each time that I had passed for what amounted to several years now, I imagined Mr. Rothman as a priest of sorts, ministering to his congregation, leading them in humming song, tending to their every need, and nurturing rather than sermonizing.

I was always taken aback by the picturesque quality of this scene and had thought on more than one occasion that beauty this bright and alluring had no place on such a dismal street. Even as I thought it, though, I thanked God for Mr. Rothman and his impeccable talent for transforming the dreary into the sublime.

"Let me know if you need anything," I called safely, knowing full well that he would ask for nothing and would dismiss me with a wave.

"Well, sure." he said brightly and waved me on, "you have a good day and don't take any wooden nickels." He walked toward me as he said it, surprising me in this singular act. Before, our interaction had always been over a distance prescribed by the garden. He had spoken many times and always in a friendly manner, but each time we had been separated by fragrant privet, a span of green grass indulgently high and bending, or a space of time that was accented by our generational divide. I breathed slowly as I anticipated some new interaction, innocent and natural, yet romantic and nearly daring, considering our past acquaintance. "You're a pretty girl," he said simply. I smiled at his kindness. For some reason, it mattered to me that he considered me pretty and, presumably, worthy. He seemed the perfect authority for beauty. Inhabiting the sole portion of life, color, kinetic reality in an area that was seemingly bereft of such beauty, Mr. Rothman possessed divine insight, I

facied. I would carry his compliment like a trophy all day.

"Thank you, Mr. Rothman. And you are an artist without compare," I said, indicating the reaches of his natural landscape.

"Not an artist, Dear. Did no thing here that God hadn't already designed. A cultivator, maybe. Maybe a mediator. You know, it's the bees really, just doing what God made 'em to do." Gingerly, he pulled a primrose from a bush that had entwined itself through the privet separating his yard from the sidewalk. Handing it to me, he said plainly, "Write about this, Child." A tear played at the corner of his right eye, and he quickly rubbed it away. "Hurry on, now, it looks like rain."

I felt like kissing him as I would my granddad. It seemed like a great good-bye had weaved itself into our exchange. Mr. Rothman had never offered me one of his flowers and, now, the gift confused me a little. Shaking the foreboding feeling that threatened to preoccupy me and to divert my mind from writing, I tucked the rose into the buttonhole of my shirt pocket. Waving goodbye, I walked to the library thinking about this exchange. Mr. Rothman always seemed feeble as he tended his bees. But I knew that when I made my evening walk later, he and Julie would be sitting on the front porch chatting happily and that he would be young and vibrant again. Always before, I had credited true love with this daily transformation, even as I doubted that any such emotion would ever exist for me.

In my own experience, love was elusive and unpredictable. My parents loved each other, it seemed, but often the atmosphere in our home was eruptive and disruptive, tense and uncontrollable. Their passions got the better of them and kissing was as likely to lead to battle as it was to lead to union. In the end, though, every battle had a reconciliation. The five of us kids had each been created from the force of these passions. *Little toddling memories of really good fights,* my parents had said. That sort of energy could be seen in each of my siblings. I liked to think that I had fallen outside of that furious circle, but just as I had my mother's eyes and father's love of the outdoors, I also exhibited a little of my mother's determination and my father's penchant for argument. Unable to rectify this nature with my personal goals, I had long ago withdrawn from oral interaction, putting my energies, my frustrations, and my dreams to paper instead.

At first, it had seemed that paper, at least, would never react to my personal frailties, and that no argument could be had there where I was solely in charge. But, after only a little while, I found that the greatest arguments and frustrations would arise from the pages, as if each could make a case for itself. From these arguments, I planned to glean some better understanding

of my Self. It seemed a lofty goal as I felt sure—and had for years—that no one was fully capable of understanding me. Even my boyfriend, Joe, one person with whom I had shared many intimate details and moments, had dismissed me once by saying simply, "You are an enigma, and that's all there is to it." It had infuriated me at the time, but as I plunged into therapeutic pages and reveled a little in the arguments there, I found that I agreed. The secret to unraveling that mystery that I found within myself, and even in my stories, lay not only in the endings to each story but also in the writing of each story. Regardless of whether or not anyone else ever read the words that I wrote, I knew that insight would be gained through the process of writing and forcing myself to interact with the other being I found on the page.

I spent hours in the library that day, working diligently on bees of my own. My bees were words and thoughts that I typed passionately into imaginary pages that adorned the screen of the computer in front of me. This uninterrupted space was my haven, my solace. Even as my parents, siblings, or boyfriend could track me down to the library, they could not insert themselves into my stories without invitation. Although they might read the thoughts that played expressively across my face or in the changes of moody eyes, they could not read the thoughts that I hid there. Each word carried meaning and emotion to other words that lighted upon the page. Hopefully, they would all come together as a garden of sorts.

These bees-words and I enjoyed a symbiotic relationship of sorts, too, as they needed me as much as I needed them. I felt that each word had a sort of soul of its own and a natural desire to fall into a creative order that was productive. The finished product, the story or poem, was as great a salve to my soul as I had heard cotton honey was to burns or rashes.

It had felt like only minutes since I had sat down in front of the computer, but a voice politely reminded me that the library was about to close. "The front desk will be closing in fifteen minutes," it said in a god-like, breaking the silence of the day. Looking up from my work, I realized that burning hues of this subtropical twilight were already casting a blue-gold haze across the lawn outside. Saving my file to disk, I felt the usual melancholy of saying good day to my solitude and my written words. Wondering if Mr. Rothman felt this same melancholy as he bid adieu to his bees, I thought that I might ask him as I passed this evening.

Nearing his house, I readied myself to engage him in a longer conversation. This was the sort of person who I might like to know more deeply. In many ways, he had already become my mentor as I found myself tempted to model my creative perseverance after his own.

As his garden came into view, I was stopped by a sight that worried and dismayed me. For the first time since coming to this town, I saw the garden without bees. No bees buzzed past my ears or whirred in the air. Diminishing sunlight did not dance across multitudinous flowers, but fell unceremoniously on a few blooms that seemed interlopers to an otherwise uninterrupted span of green. Turning my gaze to where I knew the bee box must stand, I found no standing thing, just a dusty square that looked foreign to the place as if no thing could exist in that spot. Wondering about this grim and uninspiring scene, I must have stood several minutes, for I was startled by a low clearing of the throat and realized that Mr. Rothman and Julie were sitting upon the porch, hidden behind the grey invisibility of the wire screening.

I walked to the porch, afraid to speak for fear that anything I said might come out shrilly. "Well, hello child." Julie spoke warmly. "You look as if you've seen a ghost." I considered her words for a moment, and then gathered myself.

"Good evening, "I returned her warmth, afraid of giving too much of myself away. "No ghosts on these solemn streets, I'm afraid." My smile must not have hidden my confusion because Mr. Rothman leaned closer to the screen, showing a head of white hair. I could hear his tan coveralls folding with the crispness of the starch that Julie had used on them.

"It's a nice night to sit on the porch," he said flatly, not unfriendly but without undue warmth. I knew that I was an interloper to his moment with his wife.

"Yes, sir. I'm sure it is but I must be on my way. I've got lots to do." I wanted to leave but knew that I could not go without asking. "Mr. Rothman," I hesitated--both fearful of and fascinated by the answer that I could not anticipate, "what's happened to your bee box and your garden?" I waited for his response as he gazed at me with an expression that showed neither shock nor confusion.

"What bees are you talking about, I wonder," Mr. Rothman said out loud as Julie smiled and moved closer into view, holding his arm lovingly and laughingly a little. In this moment, I felt a special warmth and comradery that I may never be able to explain. Then Mr. Rothman said warmly, "Well, dear, you know, I guess you must be part of the family now." I watched him expectantly but confused.

"Your bees," I asked again, "where are they?"

"Child, only the late Mr. Rothman ever kept any bees." He smiled at me as he said it. "I enjoyed watching them once, too, but never had the patience for keeping them myself. Box has been gone nearly as long as he

has, I reckon."

I felt as if I were in some sort of surreal dream, playing on the shores of reality but not quite stepping into it. "Aren't you Mr. Rothman?" I asked in the childlike way that I had long ago dismissed.

I could see an unexpected whiteness of teeth as he smiled through the screen. "Sure am, but I'm only one of a long line of Mr. Rothmans. My dad was another. He was the beekeeper. Garden's not been the same since he passed away. That was the year that I moved back home with Julie to care for him like he had once cared for me."

I cannot say that I immediately understood what was being told. I felt a warmness, though, spreading over me and a sense of belonging that was new to me. "He's a dear man," I said matter-of-factly, gazing around the yard to the places in which I had expected to find growing clumps of flowers.

"Yes, he is," Julie offered, "and he must be fond of you. Only a few people have commented on the bees, each of them family members. He was a solitary person like you, unapproachable by most but dear to some."

"How long has he been gone?" I asked, no longer surprised by this revelation but filled with many questions. Looking down to my shirt pocket, I was not surprised to find the buttonhole empty. Perhaps I had dropped the flower, or perhaps it had been only a figment of my prolific imagination.

"It's been nearly forty years now," Mr. Rothman said. "But, you know, he's never really been gone for those f us who knew, or know, him well."

There seemed so much to say, but I found myself unable to vocalize what I was feeling and ached for pen and paper to tend my words. Saying good night, I began my walk home beneath the trees that seemed alive now with the sounds of the southern night: cooing birds and a breeze that moved melodiously through leaves that would cast shadows in the daylight.

The walk home was strangely comforting. The grey house that had been disappointing to me as I had started out this morning now held greater mystery and promise. Remembering the vibrant family who had lived there before and had painted it a dazzling peach, I knew that I was not alone in my recollections. Each of those children and their parents shared memories of that space and time. Stretching my thoughts to moments from my earliest days in this town, I remembered another couple who had lived there even before that family had. That couple had not been unlike the Rothmans. Decrepit then, but apparently in love, those two had once sat upon their side porch, enjoying solitary moments together. This house had known many owners and would, I hoped, know many more.

I had learned to chronicle my life and the events of my town through

words that would be applied to paper and would exist in a space unconquerable by amnesiac time. These houses, this town, and the inhabitants of both, would leave their imprints on the spaces in which they dwelt and lived. Together, perhaps, this place and I could share more than just memories. Perhaps, we would create some of our own and give voices to those who had passed.

Entering my own home, I found the scene unchanged. My brothers ran through in stamping feet and bellowing, argumentative voices. My parents echoed this natural strife in arguments of their own. Passing the door to my sister's room, I found it open and observed her as she lay across the bed on her tummy, her feet lifted into the air and her legs crossed at the ankles. She listened to music that poured from headphones attached to her computer. My sister would escape turmoil in her own way. Thinking that I would use the solace of paper and a pen to escape it in mine, I climbed the stairs to my attic room and found a new determination to preserve these memories rather than to eradicate them.

Sitting by my window, I prepared to start my evening writing as I always did, with a prayer. Hearing a forlorn buzzing sound, I looked to the window sill and found a solitary bee trapped there. A little afraid of being stung, I carefully opened the window and set him free. I hoped that he might meet my Mr. Rothman. In the distance, I could see a light at the Rothman house and wondered if they were thinking of me.

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